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Epistemic Decolonization: Toils and Troubles

Abstract

Demands for decolonization in epistemology and educational theory have seen an upsurge in the debate of the last years. These demands often conceal inherent logical and practical problems of the concept itself as well as of its consequences. In this paper we give an overview of these problems and raise open questions which advocates of epistemic decolonization necessarily have to deal with. We are going to show that (1) the practicality of epistemic decolonization within academic teacher education cannot be taken for granted and that (2) the demand for epistemic decolonization itself can be self-defeating.

Keywords: epistemic decolonization, teacher education, relativism, epistemic pluralism, (in)commensurability, tacit/implicit presuppositions

Introduction

Demands for decolonization in epistemology and educational theory have seen an upsurge in the debate of the last years (e.g. Philosophical Papers 2020, which dedicated the whole issue to the topic). The well-intentioned and important demands (for reciprocal respect between different knowledge cultures, for breaking up the Eurocentric view, etc.) often conceal inherent logical, and practical problems of the concept itself as well as of its consequences. In this paper we give an overview of these problems and raise open questions which advocates of epistemic decolonization, properly understood¹, will necessarily be confronted with sooner or later. We are going to show not only that (1) the practicality of epistemic decolonization within academic teacher education cannot be taken for granted, but also that (2) the demand for epistemic decolonization itself can be self-defeating in various ways.

In the first part, we explain what we mean by the term *epistemic decolonization* and already address one problem connected with it, namely that the tacit must become sayable. In the second part, by drawing on works from Kuhn, Polanyi, Searle and Wittgenstein, among others, we expose the radical explications that epistemic decolonization demands from us. Furthermore, we make it clear that

1 That is, not stopping at the curricular level, but looking at the deeper, implicit presuppositions that underlie our teaching practices in general (see sect. 1).

even if the explication should succeed, sooner or later we will have to deal with the problem of contradictory presuppositions in encountering knowledge systems, for which it has to be asked whether they are commensurable or can only stand side by side, integrated into their network. Once the already questionable undertaking of transforming implicit² presuppositions into explicit propositions has been mastered, these are to be reflected upon and relativized in juxtaposition to the implicit presuppositions of other epistemic systems. Thus, the second and third demands of epistemic decolonization that we problematize are reflection and relativization. Finally, we also address relativism as a psychological as well as a sociological problem.

1 Epistemic Decolonization – a Definition

Although epistemic decolonization has become such a prominent topic, the meaning of the term itself, and therefore the topic under discussion varies a lot.³ When we talk about epistemic decolonization in this paper, let us first clarify what is meant by its opposite, epistemic colonization. One possible reading of colonization, outlined by Sabine Krause and Ines Maria Breinbauer in their call for this book project, takes it as the state in which “the way of generating and transmitting knowledge” in the various fields of teacher education (dealing with pedagogical knowledge, subject content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, respectively) “remains *unaddressed* and *unreflected*” (Krause & Breinbauer 2022, 1, own transl., italics in the orig.). Accordingly, decolonization means addressing and reflecting on these methods of knowledge generation and transmission. In line with the call we are concentrating on the epistemic aspect of decolonization, which means we are operating with a weak reading of decolonization which is not focused on territorial oppression and exploitation (usually associated with the word *colonialism/colonization*). Therefore, we always speak of *epistemic* decolonization. It goes without saying that European imperialism and oppression of non-European peoples is intimately linked to the epistemic aspect (and a reason for the prevalent Eurocentric view in education, for example) and that there are, e.g., also forms of *epistemic* oppression (Dotson 2014⁴), or exploitation (Dunne

2 In this paper, we use the terms “implicit” and “tacit” synonymously.

3 For a useful overview see Mitova (2020).

4 Kristie Dotson’s discussion of “[t]hird-order epistemic exclusion” (2014, 129), however, comes close to our discussion of implicit presuppositions, when she claims that “the parameters of one’s epistemological system must be recognized and, quite possibly, radically altered.” (2014, 131) She also acknowledges that such “third-order changes” (2014, 131) are extremely difficult, without explicitly referring to tacitness as a problem (2014, 131-133). Unlike her, we are not focusing on specific kinds of exclusion due to a clash of different epistemological systems but on the general difficulty of recognizing one’s own tacit assumptions.

& Kotsonis 2023). While it is crucial to develop countermeasures against them,⁵ our focus is not on these epistemic forms of violence but on the basic and highly challenging task of bringing to the fore our deeply rooted, tacit assumptions of how knowledge is or should be generated and transmitted. In this sense we agree with the movement of “decolonizing the university” (Leiviskä 2023, 227), as summarized by Anniina Leiviskä. She states that its “aim is, rather, to challenge and transform the epistemological foundations involved in the production and transmission of knowledge.” (2023, 227) According to her, “the movement focuses on questioning a Eurocentric monocultural approach to knowledge, research, teaching, and learning, and emphasizes the plurality of ways of knowing and engaging with reality and history.” (2023, 227) If we want to change these epistemological foundations, however, we need to know what they consist in. We take implicit presuppositions to be part of these foundations. Accordingly, when we refer to epistemic decolonization in this paper, we mean the addressing and reflecting on the *tacit* methods of knowledge generation and transmission. We are concentrating not on decolonizing the university in general, but on the specific challenges of decolonizing teacher education within European universities.⁶

We also do not focus on the imposition of Western *content* of education and therefore not on ways how to extend or relativize the standard Western canon in education.⁷ Obviously, we do not deny the importance of that undertaking, but are simply interested in a more radical understanding of epistemic decolonization: we try to look beneath the content level, at the roots of knowledge generation and transmission. It is a well-known fact that implicit presuppositions play a fundamental role in these processes. As many epistemologists and philosophers of science have shown, implicit presuppositions underlie every body of knowledge (see for example Baumgartner 1993, Collingwood 1940, Fleck 1980, Kuhn 1996, Polanyi 1962, Wittgenstein *OC*). We consider epistemic and pedagogical colonization as a communication process in which these presuppositions are not accounted for and therefore cannot become the subject of negotiation. Accord-

5 See the literature on liberation from this oppression, on epistemic disobedience, and the like (e.g. Mignolo 2009, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017, Dennis 2018, Mitova 2020, Domínguez 2021).

6 This kind of decolonization, if undertaken by Western academics (as assumed here), would be, in Mitova’s terminology, a critique “from-within” – as opposed to a critique “from-without”, i.e. “from the point of view of marginalised knowers.” (2020, 198)

7 While many approaches focus on the content/curricular level, this strategy has very recently been criticized by Enslin & Hedge (2023) as well as Davids (2024), albeit from very different perspectives. While Davids, who focuses on South Africa, argues for including the “subjectivities of student (or teacher) identities and lived realities” (2024, 10), Enslin and Hedge suggest to widen our view to “capitalist structures and practices” that “sustain current forms of coloniality.” (2023, 2) An approach that focuses on the curriculum but criticizes the accusation of Eurocentrism can be found in Williams (2021), who focuses on literary texts. He argues for “the claim that many texts included within the literary canon are critical of the economic, moral, gender and cultural hegemony of the Western establishment.” (2021, 865)

dingly, decolonization of knowledge transmission is understood as a process of identifying tacit assumptions underlying this transmission with the aim of not unreflectedly socializing the addressees into these assumptions, but to make them discussable and comparable with alternative assumptions and thus to put them up for disputation.

This results in the first radical demand for decolonization: The tacit must become sayable. This demand is radical because with tacit or implicit assumptions we do not merely mean assumptions that are not spelled out, but could with some effort be made explicit. Nor do we refer to cases such as “willful hermeneutical ignorance” (Pohlhaus 2012) where epistemic resources by marginalized voices are actually not tacit at all, but deliberately dismissed. In contrast, what we aim to discuss is the access to extremely deep-rooted assumptions (similar to what Searle (1983, 155) has called “Background presuppositions”) about the methods of knowledge production and transmission. That this kind of transformation or explication⁸ is not an easy task we will try to illustrate with three different examples. They all are related to teacher education and we will revert to them throughout this paper.

Take first an example on an epistemic level: the unquestioned agreement in the teacher education debate that it should be science-oriented in both its subject-related and pedagogical components. It is often criticized by epistemic relativists (most radically by Paul Feyerabend, cf. 1975) that science⁹ is assigned too much importance. According to them, viewing science as providing objective knowledge and a privileged access to the world is fundamentally mistaken. In medicine, for example, also non-Western methods should stand side by side the Western scientific approach. Although in its extreme forms this relativistic view is more than questionable, it highlights an important fact: The scientific encounter with the world is not per se superior to other approaches. We can also approach the world in its respective diverse forms bodily, aesthetically, or spiritually, and the understanding of these different approaches to the world varies enormously across times and cultures.

As a second example take “Bildung” as the basic concept of pedagogy in the German-speaking world, and think of what it tacitly entails and what cannot be easily understood by someone who is not familiar with the relevant tradition of thought. Even an English correlate is lacking – “education” is semantically different. Certain terms can simply not be translated without losing essential parts

8 In this paper we use the two terms interchangeably.

9 We use “science” here in the sense of Aristotelian *epistēmē* (see NE VI 3, 1139b18-36). According to Bent Flyvbjerg, who is also referring to Aristotle, this is just one of “the different roles of science” (2001, 61), the others being *technē* and *phronēsis*. He criticizes that all science is often reduced to *epistēmē*, although the potential of the social sciences, for example, lies in being practiced as *phronēsis* (2001, 61).

of their underlying tacit meaning. Therefore, the question remains open how to make different conceptions understandable in the first place to people outside one's own community or language. Can a German educational theorist and a Zen philosopher talk about education and really understand each other? It would be interesting to see what happens if they start comparing "Bildung" with "Mushin" (see for the latter Nishihira 2017).

Third, at the very concrete level of subject teaching, take a subject like economics, where not only the basic models but also the subject as a whole can remain incomprehensible if one does not share basic 'Western' values and assumptions, for example, the right to private property or the notion of an invisible hand and non-intentional effects of action. The terminology of economics, and the conception of economy in the first place is tacitly embedded in course content and teaching methods and can lead to problems of understanding if not shared or acknowledged by the students.

2 Toils and Troubles

Despite their good intentions there are several problems some advocates of epistemic decolonization risk running into. In the following, we will outline the most fundamental ones resulting from the demands for explication, reflection, and relativization. It remains an open question whether decolonization, as understood in this paper, is actually desirable – especially in the realm of teacher education.

2.1 The (Im)possibility of Explication and Critical Reflection

As has already been illustrated, we should not be overly confident regarding the ability to spell out our own implicit assumptions, let alone critically reflect upon them. Although Karl R. Popper is optimistic in this regard, there are rival positions that try to explain why identifying our background and critically reflecting on it is very difficult, if not outright impossible.¹⁰ In the following we will give a short overview of the optimistic and the pessimistic viewpoint with regard to explication and critical reflection to then sketch a possible middle way:

The optimistic view

According to Popper, our implicit assumptions can be critically tested (and therefore, *a fortiori*, also identified). In the context of scientific theories he talks about "basic statements" (1959, 100) on which our theories rest. Although we do stop at a certain point and accept certain basic statements without further testing, they

10 Wittmann & Neuweg (2021) also point to the difficulty of making the background visible and ask whether this is possible at all and, if so, whether we can critically reflect on it and adapt it accordingly (cf. 2021, 268).

are in principle further testable (cf. 1959, 104f.). Even when he talks explicitly about our background knowledge Popper maintains that this kind of knowledge can be changed or rejected, which implies that it can be critically examined (cf. 1972, 71). He even goes so far as to claim that it “can be challenged and criticized at any time” (1972, 34). He does acknowledge that “it is quite impracticable to challenge all of them [i.e. our background assumptions] at the same time” (1965, 238), but in his view we can still challenge them, part by part: “all criticism must be piecemeal” (1965, 238). If we apply this view to our transformation problem, this means that we could indeed critically reflect on our implicit assumptions, only not on all of them together and at once, but on one at a time until, finally, all our assumptions have been tested. This view, however, ignores the great difficulty of bringing our background assumptions to the fore in the first place as well as their network character.

The pessimistic view

Prominent advocates for the view that our implicit assumptions cannot be spelled out or, if possible, cannot be tested (or that it would be senseless to try this) are Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and John Searle, but also Ludwig Wittgenstein is often read in this way. Although they might coincide in this aspect, it goes without saying that their views have to be seen in a differentiated way: while Kuhn famously talks about the incommensurability of different scientific theories (cf. Kuhn 1996) which, however, according to him does not necessarily imply incomparability (cf. Oberheim & Hoyningen-Huene 2018, section 1; this claim is debatable though: cf. Putnam 1981, 118), Feyerabend goes even further in claiming that the contents of incommensurable theories are also incomparable (cf. 1975, 284). He explicitly denies the possibility of explication and although discussion would be possible, this could only proceed in an irrational way (cf. 1975, 270f.). Critically testing our whole network of implicit assumptions – “Background presuppositions” in Searle’s terminology (1983, 155) or “hinges” in Wittgenstein’s (*OC* 341, 343, 655) – also seems to be excluded by Searle and Wittgenstein.¹¹ We need to hold on to something when we critically test certain assumptions. We cannot question this basis while engaged in critical reflection (cf. *OC* 115, 341–343). Ripping out single assumptions of our background does not work either because of their connectedness to other parts of the background (on this network character, cf. Searle 1983, 141–143, 151).

11 According to Searle, our Background presuppositions (or *capacities/practices*, as he prefers to call them) are not even propositional (cf. 1983, 142, 156).

A middle way?

With regard to critical reflection, however, Wittgenstein does not necessarily have to be read in the radical pessimistic way sketched above. The danger of the pessimistic view is that it could easily lead to epistemic relativism.¹² Duncan Pritchard suggested a Wittgenstein interpretation which evades this problem. He focuses on what has famously been called *hinge epistemology* (by drawing on Wittgenstein's hinge metaphor in *OC* 341, 343). According to Pritchard's interpretation, hinges (what we call *implicit assumptions* in this paper¹³) are "essentially arational" (2021, 1118), but in case of disagreement this disagreement can still be resolved by drawing on the shared set of our hinge commitments (cf. 2021, 1122). Pritchard writes: "That all rational evaluation takes place relative to hinge commitments is entirely compatible with there being a great deal of overlap in subjects' hinge commitments, even when they are from very different cultures." (2016, 109)

Let us go back to the example mentioned at the beginning of the belief that science is a privileged access to the world. One can enter into conversation about this even with seemingly very foreign cultures, e.g., with members of the African tribe of the Azande. They believe that witchcraft is the major cause of unfortunate events as disease or death (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937).¹⁴ But there are overlapping hinge commitments. We can study this with Evans-Pritchard's example of the collapse of a grain storage basket. They are mounted on poles and also serve as shady resting places for people to sit under. Occasionally the baskets collapse and kill people who are seated underneath. Azande are well aware of the role of termites in making the poles brittle and insofar they think in the scientific categories of cause and effect, as people that were socialized in Western knowledge systems do. But the activity of the termites are not considered sufficient. Why did the storage collapse at exactly that point in time when particular people were seated underneath? The answer is: Witchcraft is the second cause with equal impact. Both in

12 Cf. Michael Williams's Wittgenstein interpretation (cf. 1991) against which Pritchard is arguing (cf. 2016, 103-110).

13 Pritchard understands "hinge commitments" as "part of the tacit intellectual backdrop against which we acquire our beliefs in non-hinge propositions" (2016, 76). This coincides with what we call implicit assumptions. Pritchard as well as Searle would not be very happy with our talk of assumptions, however, since they both stress (in different terminology) that our implicit assumptions are not propositional (Searle) or at least not beliefs (they might be "expressed via other propositional attitudes", Pritchard 2016, 91). In loss of a better terminology we stick to *assumptions*, but agree with Searle that these are not intentional states (cf. 1983, 156-158). Whether hinges are propositions is debated in Wittgenstein scholarship (see Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Coliva 2013, Pritchard 2016).

14 It goes without saying that this is just one example and that we do not take it as representative of non-Western thought in general. There are innumerable diverse epistemic cultures in the world that such a task would be impossible in the first place. We chose the example of the Azande because this culture might seem very foreign to Westerners and to highlight that the Azande are not so foreign after all in their epistemic assumptions.

answer and question we can recognize overlapping hinge commitments. First: The Azande include witchcraft in their causal (!) thinking. This is expressed by Azande in a metaphor of “two spears” whereby “natural” causes and “witchcraft” can supplement one another like two spears hitting an elephant are considered equally causally affective (1937, 74). And second: Although Westerners often do not share the belief that witchcraft is the reason for such events, even they understand the question well – after all, they ask it from time to time as a question about whether something in their life was chance or destiny.

So it is not the case that different epistemic systems are completely isolated from each other. Qua human beings we share some fundamental implicit assumptions (this probably corresponds to what Searle has termed “deep Background”, Searle 1983, 143).¹⁵

Already Searle acknowledges that indeed there are instances in which we are conscious of our own implicit assumptions. These are the moments in which something goes wrong. Is it our task then to conjure up a “breakdown” (Searle 1983, 155; cf. Baumgartner 1993, 23f.) intentionally to somehow open up the background for investigation and reflection? And are such focused, intentional breakdowns possible in the first place or is this process totally contingent?

2.2 A Two-sided Problem of Translation

Concentrating on the process of translation, it is important to note that we are not dealing with one single process, but with two:

- (a) accessing our own implicit assumptions
- (b) finding out the implicit assumptions of the colonized and trying to relate the one to the other

Identifying and spelling out our own presuppositions behind the commitment to “Bildung”, e.g., the importance of the individual and his or her free development, skepticism towards potentially restrictive collectives or the role of self-reflection, does not entail at all knowledge of what Mushin is. And reflecting upon our own presuppositions about economy does not entail at all knowledge of how people living in non-capitalist economic systems think and feel about economy.

Therefore, the following question arises: Is it our task to also try to achieve (b)? Or are we not rather dependent on the help of the colonized? Since it is already questionable whether comprehensive explication is possible in the case of one’s own implicit assumptions (see 2.1) it seems too demanding (and, moreover, sus-

15 Anniina Leiviskä goes in a similar direction when she “reject[s] the idea of incommensurability of different knowledge systems and argue[s] that all epistemological positions should be subject to shared standards of knowledge.” (2023, 225)

piciously connected with a colonizing attitude) to reveal others' implicit assumptions from the outside. As a result, we have to rely on the help of the colonized – who, however, most certainly will have the same hard time identifying their own background.

Even if we adopt the optimistic view the question remains of what actually happens if both translations (a and b) are possible and it then turns out that the implicit assumptions on x contradict each other. Since hierarchies are explicitly rejected in the concept of decolonization,¹⁶ the only viable option in these cases seems to be suspension of judgment. But such a move comes with high costs.

2.3 The Problem of Relativism

Teaching presupposes a point of view and knowledge that, as such, is uncontroversial in the teaching-learning process. There is no learning without trust and the recognition of authority (see, for example, *OC* §160; Polanyi 1962, 53-55). In this way we cannot escape centrism since we need to decide for an epistemic culture, whether we like it or not, for an idea of what learning is finally all about (“Bildung”), and for very concrete teaching subjects and contents. In other words, the demand for relativization is bound to failure.

For successful communication we need to understand the underlying tacit assumptions our teacher uses in at least roughly the same way as she does. From this thought the following necessary success criterion of teaching (C) can be extracted:

$$C: S_T(a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n)_{TACIT} = S_S(a_1^*, a_2^*, \dots, a_n^*)_{TACIT}$$

where *a* is a conception which is relevant for teaching and *S* constitutes the whole set of these conceptions a teacher *T* or a student *S* has, respectively.

When it comes to the underlying conceptions of the subject to be taught there needs to be agreement to ensure successful transmission of knowledge. In order for this to work the student should, as far as possible, try to check or adapt her own assumptions¹⁷ by immersing herself in the academic culture of her subject topic (of course, this could be done from the other side too). We have already shown that accessing one's own tacit presuppositions might be very difficult, if not impossible. However, even if we grant the possibility, the outcome would

16 See, for example, Leiviskä (2023, 227): “Challenging the priority of Western modern science, and any universalist, privileged epistemological stance for that matter, is an essential part of decolonization.” Like us, Leiviskä criticizes this project. She argues from a Habermasian stance against epistemic relativism (see 2023, 239f.).

17 This does not necessarily imply subjugating to a Eurocentric view since success criterion C is meant to be universally valid, i.e. if I am a student in a non-European country this could well mean I have to adopt the non-European tacit assumptions of the respective culture (at least if that university is not following the often predominant Western standard – this could then be a case for criticizing and changing the assumptions on the teacher's side).

certainly not be a non-hierarchical, equal standing of a_1 and a_1^* (if they differ), but a decision¹⁸ (ideally agreed on by both sides) that, for example, a_1^* is the better conception for the present teaching purposes. The result would be a hierarchy and therefore the demand for relativization could impossibly be met.

2.4 On the Road to Skepticism

There are further problems connected with this demand for relativization. Is it a good thing, epistemically and morally, to relativize *all* of our tacit assumptions? Such relativization has moral as well as epistemic import:

On the moral side, different implicit assumptions about concepts like education can lead to very different teaching systems and methods which might be condemned in one culture (seen as a form of drilling) but supported in another (seen as a form of discipline). In this sense, decolonization seems to support a form of moral relativism. Since there seem to be at least some basic, universally shared norms (e.g. the condemnation of torture), however, and because of the logical problems of relativism itself (see 2.5), it seems clear that comprehensive relativization of our tacit assumptions should not be a goal to aim for.¹⁹

On the epistemic side, skepticism is traditionally something many epistemologists have tried to avoid. The sceptic's demand for suspension of judgment (which results from the relativist's claim that all knowledge systems are on a par) is especially fatal within teacher education. Such relativism dissolves education, school, and teacher training from within. An *epoché* cannot be desirable especially in these fields. If one thinks epistemic decolonization through to the end, it leads directly into a skepticism of educational theory.

2.5 Contradictions

Decolonization can also face fundamental problems in the logical realm. Basically, the usual problem of relativism applies here: The demand for relativism, if not further qualified, is a universal demand. This, however, is self-defeating:

- (1) Every statement can be assessed for truth/falsity only with reference to a certain epistemic culture. There are no universal truths.
- (2) (1) is true universally.
- (3) According to (1), however, (2) must be false.

¹⁸ Already Wittgenstein emphasizes the role of decision in *OC* 146, 230, 362, 516.

¹⁹ Tobi (2020) also emphasizes the danger of moral relativism for the decolonization enterprise itself. If we want to argue for decolonization, we have to at least "take the claim 'we should decolonise knowledge' to be an objective truth." (2020, 257)

The epistemic relativist seems to hold (1) and (2) although they are mutually incompatible.²⁰ A consistent epistemic relativist cannot claim that her own position is correct generally speaking, but only within a certain epistemic culture or framework. She can never expect others to follow her or to be convinced by the relativistic view since (1) itself has to be, according to this view, a relative statement.²¹ This is a fundamental problem that advocates of decolonization have to deal with if they want to retain their demand for relativization and convince others of it.²²

A different kind of contradiction results from a conflict between the aims of decolonization: critical self-reflection on the one hand, and relativization on the other hand. We have shown above that these two aims are already in themselves problematic. Combining them, however, produces even more problems: spelling out tacit assumptions leads to their potential critical evaluation, i.e. to the critical reflection of the whole system – one of the aims of decolonization. However, this consequence seems to run counter to the other aim of decolonization: relativization of different systems and rejection of hierarchies. Either we critically reflect upon the system – which implies an objective measuring bar and which will lead to hierarchies –, or we reject hierarchies and defend the position that every assertion needs to be evaluated within its own culture and is incommensurable with others. This implies that we do not have an objective measuring bar. However, this also makes critical reflection impossible. Relativism implies suspension of judg-

20 Positions that fall prey to this kind of relativism seem to be Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) and Icaza & Vázquez (2018). The former holds that “all human beings are born into valid, legitimate and functional knowledge systems” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017, 77) which seems to imply that all those knowledge systems are equally valid or legitimate (even if they radically differ, we might add). The latter reject “universal validity claims” in general and stress the “location of all knowledges” (Icaza & Vázquez 2018, 119) which leads into exactly the relativist contradiction outlined above.

21 For a more detailed outline of this criticism, cf. Putnam (1981, 119–124). Furthermore, he explicitly rejects Kuhn’s and Feyerabend’s positions as “self-refuting” (ibid., 114).

22 It goes without saying that there are nuanced accounts that try to avoid the pitfalls of relativism in its various forms. For just two recent examples, see Tobi (2020) and Davids (2024). Tobi criticizes Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s claim for the equal standing of different epistemic systems that indeed does fall prey to relativism (Tobi 2020, 257; see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Tobi, however, does not tackle the kind of relativist self-contradiction that we outlined above but sees moral relativism at work here (Tobi 2020, 257). Consequently, in his account he tries to avoid any relativist claims and, by applying a virtue-theoretic framework, argues for “epistemic fair-mindedness as the goal of epistemic practice.” (2020, 275) For him, epistemic decolonization is “*an epistemically faithful and just knowledge-forming practice that is open to, and actively draws on, diverse perspectives.*” (2020, 261, italics in the original) His declared attempt of “avoiding the need to rank epistemic perspectives in the first place” (2020, 275), however, seems to conflict with his former claim that when deciding on a syllabus, we should apply the criterion of epistemic merit which again is determined “by how much a particular syllabus is faithful to the fair-minded pursuit of knowledge” (2020, 269), which very much sounds like an objective measuring bar that will lead to some kind of ranking. Davids (2024, 8) makes it very clear that her aim lies not in relativizing different epistemic positions, but in challenging the dominant narratives.

ment and therefore excludes critical reflection, even asserts its impossibility. An essential problem of decolonization as outlined here is its simultaneous demands for relativism and critical reflection, two mutually incompatible aims.²³

2.6 The Psychological and Sociological Problem of Relativism

Let us conclude with one last problem. The assumption that it is in principle possible to take a neutral, supra-cultural standpoint seems to ground the decolonization enterprise unsaid. Decolonization taken to its logical conclusion would apparently have to result in the demand to be able to immerse oneself flexibly in different epistemic systems. This supposedly ideal picture, however, deprives oneself of an own, home culture (if all of its aspects can be so readily dismissed by the subject). If we flexibly change our fundamental tacit assumptions like a chameleon this leads to a loss of personality and a loss of understanding. We need to cling on to *some* assumption if we want to understand, reflect or doubt anything (for this, see also *OC* 341-343). If we say farewell to all of our assumptions we understand nothing and everything: nothing because we have not even one 'hinge' our door of rationality could turn on; everything because we just switch our hinges which means we understand completely contradictory assumptions without being able to mediate between them (since all epistemic systems seem equal to us, every position seems 'right' to us from the corresponding perspective) leading to suspension of judgment and passivity in action.

3 Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined open questions and difficulties that advocates of epistemic decolonization need to deal with. We have seen that explication and critical reflection pose two enormous tasks which are not easy to be met. Moreover, there are also logical difficulties that need to be avoided. This list of problems has not the aim to crush all demands for the vital task of epistemic decolonization, however. We rather hope that these questions will be seen as a challenge and inspiration to sharpen existing and future accounts of epistemic decolonization thereby leading to fruitful approaches which are not vulnerable to the obvious objections.

23 Richard Rorty goes in a similar direction in his criticism of Eurocentrism-criticizers/cultural relativists: "This nonrationalist version of Kantianism [i.e. that every individual or culture has incommensurable worth] [...] often tries to combine the claim that every culture is as valid as every other with the claim that some cultures, [i.e. "a set of shared habits of action", 188] – or at least one, that of the modern West – are 'sick' or 'sterile' or 'violent' or 'empty' [...]" (1998, 190) Although Rorty has often been labeled a relativist himself, he rejects that attribution (cf. *ibid.*, 43-62).

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