

*For The Philosophers' Magazine*

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The present character of the philosophical community in South Africa is to a large extent the result of two historical causes. One is apartheid - the system of racial separation enforced by the National Party government from 1948 to the early 1990s - and a second is the longstanding separation between white Afrikaners and those of English descent. Before the 1960s, universities were by and large divided into those in which the language of instruction was Afrikaans, and those in which classes were taught in English. The Extension of University Education Act in 1959 brought several black universities into existence, and banned existing universities from admitting black students. The result was a tripartite distinction: white English universities (e.g., Cape Town, Rhodes, Witwatersrand), white Afrikaans universities (e.g., Pretoria, Stellenbosch), and black universities (e.g., Fort Hare, Western Cape). The boundaries of this taxonomy have long been blurred, and there is a slowly-growing mix of colour and language use in the student bodies and staff at many universities. Nonetheless, philosophy departments still remain significantly divided in terms of colour, ethnicity and concerns, and so the tripartite distinction is a useful one for understanding, at least in broad strokes, the philosophical community here.

One of the more striking features of living in South Africa – a feature that many of us struggle to come to grips with – is that each of us is surrounded by people who belong to ethnic and cultural groups about which, ultimately, we know very little. In addition to linguistic, cultural, and economic differences are layers of suspicion and general distrust that have been building for generations. This feature also characterizes our membership in the South African philosophical community. Even the most well-intended and pluralistic philosopher has to do a great deal of work to fully understand the background and tradition informing the work practices of colleagues outside of his linguistic and cultural group. The two of us are most familiar with philosophical work going on in historically English-speaking white universities, and so most of what we have to say will apply to that subset of the South African philosophical community. The few words that we hazard to say about philosophy in the traditionally black and Afrikaans-language universities are said with some trepidation.

Historically black universities have been subject to a range of disadvantages, in terms of the kind of faculty, staff, and students that they can attract, and in terms of the kind of primary and secondary education that their students have had. Consequently, one will not find philosophy departments that have thrived according to standards by which many other departments in the world measure their success; you will not find in these departments high research outputs and high numbers of post-graduate students. Nonetheless, philosophy departments in historically black universities have been far more important in shaping the recent history of this country than any others. Many of the first and second-generation leaders of the African National Congress, for example, were educated at

historically black universities, and many of them would have had exposure to philosophy there. Leaders of the ANC and other revolutionary groups (e.g., Stephen Bantu Biko) placed great value on abstract thinking, argumentation and debate about pressing issues informing the moral/political climate of South Africa. As the black education system became more and more neglected in the 1970s and 80s, older leaders introduced younger leaders to these skills and values outside of universities. (Famously, this even took place in prison; many of the political prisoners incarcerated on Robben Island between 1961 and 1991 describe it as a place of learning.) The most interesting and important philosophical works by black writers have, consequentially, been written by non-academics like Biko and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

While philosophy at several universities is taught in Afrikaans, only a few philosophers publish in Afrikaans, as most Afrikaans-speaking philosophers want to engage with the broader South African and global communities. Afrikaans-language philosophy has in the past been informed by a range of influences, including Calvinist theology and Afrikaner nationalism, but Continental philosophy is perhaps the most salient and significant influence on academic Afrikaner thought today. This is largely a matter of heritage and language; many philosophers in Afrikaans-speaking departments have been trained in the Netherlands or Belgium. Our impression is that, like many other writers in the recent Continental tradition, Afrikaans philosophers have for some time tended to be more concerned with 'relevant' issues than their English-language peers. Afrikaans philosophy leans more towards issues close to the surface in the society around them. During apartheid, this meant a preoccupation with the social and the political, including both resistance and (infamously) apologetics for Afrikaner nationalism. The inclination to relevance continues today: the only serious feminist work in philosophy in this country, for example, takes place in Afrikaans-language departments, and applied philosophy has a large presence in Afrikaans-language philosophy departments throughout the country.

English-speaking philosophers have a growing presence in the philosophical community as a whole. The two main journals in the country – *South African Journal of Philosophy* and *Philosophical Papers* – are managed by English-speaking philosophers. They constitute the majority of delegates at the annual conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa in January, and they are active in holding a handful of conferences and workshops each year. This growth is, in part, a matter of overseas influence: most of the philosophers currently in English-speaking philosophy departments are either from or have gained their higher degrees in a country other than South Africa (including both of us), and many of them have had their training at intensely competitive institutions. This is not, we think, a bad thing. While we do not want to downplay the quality of philosophical work being done in South Africa – on the contrary, we wish to advertise and endorse the sincere, significant work that is being done here – this community is small and somewhat isolated, and it will always benefit from serious outside influences in the form of immigrants or overseas training. In any event, the fact that many members of this community are either from or trained in another country means that many

of us have at some point experienced a shock upon our introduction or re-introduction to this country and this continent – a shock at its poverty, its violence, its segregation, and its tensions. It is a shock that can and does generate a strong urge to deal with this country and/or this continent in our work.

After a professional visit to South Africa in 1986, the American philosopher Robert Paul Wolff wrote:

I suppose the most extraordinary aspect of philosophy at the English universities is its total similarity to the philosophy taught or written at American or English universities ... I saw very little evidence that English language South African academic philosophy had been affected in any significant way by the fact that it was being conducted in a fascist society that is torn apart by the conflict between a repressive state apparatus and a nation-wide liberation movement. ('Philosophy in South Africa Today', *Philosophical Forum* XVIII, 2-3: 1986-87, pp. 96-97)

In contrast to the two other sub-communities of philosophy in this country, English-speaking philosophers have been notable for their neglect of their context. There are a few notable exceptions to this, like the political philosopher Richard Turner, who was assassinated for his writings and activities in 1978. For the most part, however, work from English-language South African philosophers has tended to be responsive to and engaged with issues raised within the world-wide English-speaking philosophical community, with little stimulus from contemporary events either on the African continent or, as Wolff points out, in their country.

This trend is changing. Philosophers in the English-speaking community are working to find ways of coming to terms with, and of being more responsive to, the context in which we work. In the background of much of the philosophy that is being produced today in South Africa is the question, a question which still has no clear answer, but which we are starting to explore: How do we respond to this country in our work, and what good can we do here?

Some of the issues that are being addressed by philosophers in this country have been brought to our attention by recent high-profile events. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee, for example, raised many questions: What are forgiveness and reconciliation, and what is the significance of each? Can forgiveness be granted collectively? What role should or can retribution play in reconciliation? Academic freedom, long a topic of concern to philosophers in this country, has raised its head again, with the publication of a high-profile report on academic freedom in South Africa by an independent task team that included philosophers (<http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000183/>). Other issues have been raised by Thabo Mbeki's presidency; his consultations with dissidents in the field of HIV research, for example, raised the pressing question of whether and why the layperson should only accept testimony from the scientist who speaks in line with his professional community. Recent work on affirmative action programmes has generated a great deal of discussion. There is also considerable interest in issues relating to political, social, moral and epistemic responsibility in this country. A recent, well-attended workshop on the topic saw discussions ranging from traditional metaphysics,

retribution, insanity and the law, and the responsibilities of philosophers.

One of the most interesting trends in philosophy in this country is the growing attempt to come to grips with the existence, nature, and importance of African philosophy and thought. White South Africans have almost always looked towards Europe, America, and Australia, rather than the rest of the continent. This, fortunately, is changing, and many of us have finally come to recognize that we need to be a part of the evolution and growth of African thought; two international conferences held in South Africa in 2007 focusing on African philosophy are a sign of this recognition. One interesting, relatively new trend here involves various attempts to develop and theorize a strain of moral standards and norms - going under various names in various cultures, but best-known in South Africa under the name 'ubuntu' - running through various sub-Saharan value systems. More than one writer has suggested that a moral theory that captures or approximates this strain might be interestingly different from moral theories currently on the table in philosophical discourse.

The interesting work that is being done in this country is by no means limited to these topics, but as the philosophical community of South Africa works to re-integrate itself with, and make itself known in, the wider international philosophical community, we are attempting to develop our distinctive voice. At the same time, we are coming to appreciate that this voice should be informed by a dialogue with colleagues from all sides of traditional divides, by the fact that Africa has a long, and perhaps unique, tradition of thought, and by a concern to address in our work some of the issues that are important to the people around us.