

OPINION

# Who can be racist: Understanding charges of racism within the philosophical community

Phila Mfundo Msimang 20 Mar 2017 11:48



"The concern we are drawing attention to is arbitrary exclusion and marginalisation that correlates with race." (David Lagerlöf/Expo)

Only now in 2017, the Philosophical Society of South Africa (PSSA) has begun confronting the lack of transformation in the discipline of philosophy and in the society itself. One thing that the recent 2017 draft report, *The Demographic Diversity of Philosophy and the Possibilities for Transforming Philosophy in South Africa*, revealed empirically, there is a bias

towards the retention of white postgraduate students and the appointment of white people in academia (especially in senior positions). White people are the most over-represented group in the field, resulting in many students raising the question of transformation and reigniting the debate of why it has not yet taken place.

Coming out of this debate have been a number of other articles in the media, a notable instance being [Rafael Winkler's article](#). The central point of his argument is that we should not make decisions for inclusion in any debate on the basis of race (and nationality, gender, and other identity categories) but rather on the merits of one's argument. [In response to him on a philosophy group](#), I pointed out that his argument is disingenuous and misleading because he puts it forward in the context of an issue where the problem being dealt with is precisely that people of merit from other races are excluded in debates in which they do qualify to participate.

Criticisms from other perspectives have also been published, one of which [questions the very premise of his argument](#) and the other putting [the present debate about racism in our society in historical context](#).

The PSSA is in crisis, and the future of the organisation remains uncertain. This is the result of the breakdown in relations between members of the society and in the broader philosophical community. There is a difference of opinion on the severity of the problem of racism and the lack of institutional transformation. There is even a debate about whether there is a problem or what the nature of the problem is, with a variety of opinions emerging on all sides of this matter.

At the most basic level, because of marginalisation and exclusion, the PSSA and the philosophical community have been accused of being racist. Some argue that racism is not a problem in philosophy, and others stress that we should not only be looking at anti-black racism by insisting that everyone can be racist. Many of these positions have been put forward to the PSSA in the form of [optionally anonymous submissions](#).

We are all aware that all people can express interpersonal racial prejudices towards one another or towards groups of people, which we may call attitudinal forms of racism. An early submission to the PSSA, which told the story of a black colleague being disregarded at an airport while a white colleague was served politely, may be an example of this kind of racism — namely, a prejudice against someone based on their supposed race.

What I and other philosophers are also trying to make the broader philosophical community

aware of are the problems of racial discrimination that are supported by historical domination — what are generally called institutionalised forms of racism. The demographics of postgraduate and professional philosophers, and of the PSSA, are an example of this problem.

A basic definition of institutional racism is marginalisation or discrimination against groups of people based on their race through institutions or social structures.

If you believe that institutional racism is controversial or unfounded: Do you think that philosophy is dominated by white people at the postgraduate and professional levels because they are exceptionally good at philosophy (and other racial groups are demonstrably weaker in philosophy), or do you think it is because there are other factors that lead to the lack of retention of racial groups other than white people?

As this question stewed in my mind, it reminded me of a passage in the biologist Steven Jay Gould's classic second edition of *The Mismeasure of Man* where he asks: "What argument against social change could be more chillingly effective than the claim that the established orders, with some groups on top and others at the bottom, exists as an accurate reflection of the innate and unchangeable intellectual capacities of people so ranked?"

It made me wonder if anyone in our community really believes that one race group is innately better than others at philosophical reasoning. It wouldn't be too surprising since these kinds of beliefs have historical precedent in philosophy, and **implicates some big names in philosophy in white supremacist racist ideology**.

When the charge of racism is levelled against the PSSA, most of the philosophy departments and the philosophical community as a whole, the charge means the South African philosophical community discriminates against or marginalises people who are not white — which in our case is mostly black people. This charge of racism speaks to the fact that philosophy students are mostly black all the way through to graduate level, but the philosophical community still turns out mostly white at the postgraduate and professional levels. I did not think this needed to be explained but some responses to our concerns, the latest of which argues that his **critics are all essentialising race** and do not even understand the nature of their own racial oppression), and a few comments (**such as this one** and **this one**) have convinced me otherwise.

In parting with the PSSA at their 2017 AGM, John Lamola **lamented in his resignation letter**: "A moment of utter despair engulfed me at a point of my observance of a display of sophistry

and blatant intellectual dishonesty as an accepted mode of rationalising self-serving positions that perpetuate a retrogressive pattern of white academic privilege.” Such “sophistry and blatant intellectual dishonesty” has continued to play itself out in the transformation debate and in response to charges of racism in the philosophical community.

In noting this, Sharli Paphitis, who was one of the co-authors of the transformation draft report, observed that “It seems clear [...] that there genuinely is a systemic lack of momentum, a lack of drive, and perhaps even a lack of will from some quarters” of our community to deal with the issues of race and transformation. Some of the argumentative turns in this debate allude to what Charles Mills meant when he said that “the white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation” and may be further evidence of an observation made by a colleague that “there are still some blatantly racist philosophers in our midst”.

On the question of who can or cannot be racist, from a philosophical point of view, there seems to be no substantive debate. The concerns we are putting forward are not just about whether people can be unkind to each other on the basis of race; the concern we are drawing attention to is arbitrary exclusion and marginalisation that correlates with race. The problem that we face is there exist dynamics of power that are intertwined with racial belonging, something many may have thought is only a feature of the distant past —especially in a scholarly intellectual discipline such as philosophy. Unfortunately, race is still with us and we cannot just wish it away. There is still much work to be done.

*Phila Mfundo Msimang is a Canon Collins Scholar and a Founding Member of the Azanian Collective (the parent body of the new Azanian Philosophical Society). He is doing his MA in philosophy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. His areas of research are in cognitive science and in the metaphysics of race.*