Philosophical Society of Southern Africa: Working Group on Transformation

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This document is compiled for the PSSA Special AGM, to be convened by the Executive Committee. The Special AGM is to determine the future of the PSSA. All contributing members to this document have worked with the intention of detailing the values and institutional culture of a Transformed PSSA. This document is not prescriptive, but serves as a set of recommendations for the members of the PSSA.

Introduction

Ensuing from the Panel Discussion held at Rhodes University in January of 2017, the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) has had to confront internal issues of race, racism and discrimination based on race. Tasked with the challenge of formulating a transformation plan, the Working Group should give due consideration to claims of racism(s) in the organisation and propose tangible and practicable policy propositions for the transformation of the intellectual community.

White Paper 3 of 1997 outlines the need to transform the South African Higher Education landscape, and create a sector reflective of the social changes of a democratic state. Then Minister of Education, Professor Sibusiso Bengu, asserts:

> The transformation of the higher education system to reflect the changes that are taking place in our society and to strengthen the values and practices of our new democracy is, as I have stated on many previous occasions, not negotiable. The higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities.

While acknowledging the fundamental tenets of Higher Education as premised on Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom outlined in sub-section 1.24 of White Paper 3, Historically White Universities (HWUs) have contravened the limitations as set out in the policy document. The limitations read as follows:

> … there is no moral basis for using the principle of institutional autonomy as a pretext for resisting democratic change or in defence of mismanagement. Institutional autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to the demands of public accountability.

The claim that HWUs – philosophy departments – and organisations largely dominated by white intellectuals in South Africa have continued to resist democratic change in the name of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, is substantiated in the composition of academic staff, curricula and institutional cultures. Philosophy in South Africa continues to be dominated by whiteness, with whiteness defending these skewed demographics using white fragility as termed by Anderson[1]. Further, white academics have continuously positioned themselves in the academe as innocent[2], while masquerading behind the discourse of transformation and decolonisation of HWUs.

Race discourse in predominantly white intellectual spaces often remains ignorant of the scholarship of critical race theory, substantiating bell hooks's claim that the commodification of blackness by whiteness has been successful, with Blackness being offered up as the new

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[1] See Anderson, J.L. 2002. 'The White Closet', *Social Philosophy Today*, 18: 97-107.
[2] See Tuck, E., and Yang K.W. 2012. 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonisation: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1(1): 1-40

delight that livens up the dull dish that is whiteness[3]. Blackness is accepted if it affirms whiteness, and racial paradigms still characterise knowledge production[4] in the South African academy. Abrahams claims that colonisation [and pursuant racial domination] has been and continues to act as disjunctures, which coalesce with the dysfunctions of Black subjectivity[5].

If Philosophy is to undergo the relevant kind of transformation, and the South African philosophical community is to continue and thrive, the community should do the following:

- Recognise that philosophy in South Africa is both a public and private good.
- Recognise that the discipline should contribute to the constitutional objectives of redress and of decreasing the inequalities that characterise South African society and the academe.
- Recognise that the discipline should contribute to the promotion of values enshrined in the constitution, while continuously reflecting on constitutional objectives and legislative regulations which govern the Higher Education sector.
- Recognise that the discipline should commit to scholarship and teaching that contributes to the transformation of Higher Education Institutions, and philosophy in particular.

These considerations begin to take seriously the critiques which have been levelled against the South African academy[6].

In the light of these considerations and the current unhappiness in the philosophical community, a Working Group was set up and authorized by the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) Executive Committee to advise on the future of the society. The Working Group supports the Executive Committee's plan to hold a special PSSA AGM in order to discuss the future of the PSSA. Below are the Working Group's recommendations, to be presented to this meeting.

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[3] hooks, b. 1992. *Black looks: Race and representation.* Boston: South End Press
[4] lmeida, S. 2015. 'Four: Race-Based Epistemologies: The Role of Race and Dominance in Knowledge Production', *Wagadu: a Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 13: 79-105
[5] Abrahams, Y. 2011. 'Colonialism, dysfunction and disjuncture: Sarah Bartmann's resistance (remix)', *Agenda*, 17(58): 12-26
[6] For instance, Nyoka notes the readiness of the South African higher education landscape to adopt western mimetic pedagogical praxes, while failing to produce its own theoretical frameworks. See Nyoka, B. 2013. 'Negation and Affirmation: A critique of Sociology in South Africa', *African Sociological Review*, 17(1): 2-24.

WORKING GROUP'S RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Some Guidelines for Implementing a Best Practices Scheme in South African Philosophy (in progress)

Events where all speakers, or all keynote/invited speakers, are from particular privileged groups can help to reinforce the image of philosophy as white and male. We suggest that the PSSA adopt the policy below with respect to organising its annual general meeting, conference, and website. We further suggest that individual departments follow the guidelines suggested here in organising their conferences and workshops. We also suggest that organisers attend to multiple dimensions of inequality, such as those of race, gender and gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, and disability.

Purpose of the scheme:

- To create a more inclusive philosophical environment.
- To strengthen South African philosophy by drawing in broader perspectives, backgrounds, and expertise.
- To promote the participation of underrepresented groups in philosophy.
- To align the philosophical community in South Africa with other Good Practices Schemes in international philosophical organisations and communities.
- To set a standard for the organization of events and colloquia conducive to racial, gender and gender identity, sexuality, and disability (both visible and invisible forms of disability) inclusivity.

Scope of the Scheme:

- Seminars, panel discussions, and conferences associated with the PSSA and its annual meeting.
- Lectures series, seminars, workshops, and conferences hosted by philosophy departments across the country.

General Recommendations:

1. The PSSA should make explicit, as part of all its policies and projects, that working towards genuine transformation of the organisation, and philosophy more broadly, requires not only sustained and ongoing effort to identify and counter discrimination, but also proactive measures to develop and ensure diversity and inclusion, which cannot be achieved purely by an absence of overt (or even subtle) discrimination but require deliberate action to address them.

2. The PSSA should adopt a policy making the following requirements on those organising conferences or seminar series (including staff, postgraduates and undergraduates):

    a. When drawing up a list of potential invited speakers, take reasonable steps to ensure that people of minority groups[7] are well represented.

    b. Where possible, consult the philosophers on your list before fixing the date of the conference, to ensure that speakers of minority groups are not just invited but will actually attend.

    c. Organisers should ensure that speakers are treated fairly on publicity[8] material and the conference programme.

    d. Departments should ensure that this policy is available to staff and students who are organising events in a permanent format (e.g. intranet, handbooks) and that they are aware of it.

3. The PSSA should, on a regular (e.g. annual) basis, monitor the racial, gender, and disability balance at conferences and seminar series organised by colleagues within the department, and, if significant imbalance emerges, take steps to strengthen their policies on increasing inclusion.

4. The PSSA should consider adopting an official seminar/talk conduct policy. This policy should offer guidelines on the style of questioning (interrogation vs genuine inquiry), the tone of seminars and the general atmosphere of talks[9].

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[7] Minority groups include, but are not limited to people of colour, women, and people living with any form of disability

[8] Not giving more prominent billing to certain speakers and obscuring others, unless warranted, say in the case of a keynote speaker.

[9] This list of norms compiled by David Chalmers offers a model: http://consc.net/norms.html

5. The PSSA should consider developing a comprehensive 'Good Practices Guide', along the lines of that produced by the American Philosophy Association (APA)[10], but tailored for the Southern African situation.

6. The PSSA should establish an Inclusion and Diversity Committee[11] that will work to ensure that the PSSA genuinely transforms and that it proactively identifies and addresses future problems.

7. The PSSA should ensure that talk, workshops, panels, and the like are organised at each of its annual conferences to discuss issues of discrimination, diversity, and inclusion within philosophy, so that there is a clear and ongoing means of airing and dealing with problems within the profession. The PSSA should also ensure that there are sessions to present and work on strategies for developing diversity and inclusivity within the discipline.

8. The PSSA should provide, on its website, curated links to useful resources on how to make philosophy more diverse and inclusive[12].

9. The PSSA should, in addition to pursuing these measures itself, encourage individual philosophy departments to consider and adopt relevant measures themselves.

While having diverse and racially balanced seminars, conferences, and departments is itself a reward, in terms of broadening and strengthening the discipline, we recommend that departments which adopt the suggested policy receive official approval and mention on the PSSA website[13].

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[10] APA Good Practices Guide:
https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/docs/Good_Practices_Guide.pdf
[11] Useful examples of similar sorts of committees are the APA's Committee on Inclusiveness in the Profession http://www.apaonline.org/group/inclusiveness and, for a more specific instance, the APA Committee on the Status of Women http://www.apaonlinecsw.org/workshops-and-summer-institutes; University of Notre Dame Philosophy Department's Climate Committee http://philosophy.nd.edu/graduate-program/the-philosophy-department-climate-page/; and Northwestern University Philosophy Department's Climate Committee https://www.philosophy.northwestern.edu/documents/misc-pdfs/Climate%20Committee.pdf
[12] Good examples of this are available on the websites of the APA http://www.apaonline.org/page/diversity_resources#groups, Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) http://www.mapforthegap.com/resources.html, and Brown University Philosophy Department http://www.sippatbrown.com/contact-1/; and Pennsylvania State University has a useful guide for e/resources/climate-advice/
[13] The Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) UK provides a model of how this might be done http://www.swipuk.org/women-friendly/

B. Policy on Racism/ Discrimination

The Working Group recommends that the PSSA draft a policy on racism/discrimination[14], along the lines of the Policy on Sexual Harassment, to be presented for approval to its members. The Working Group acknowledges the previous discussions at PSSA AGMs on such a policy, which resulted in no resolution, but considers the issue to be important enough to revisit.

C. Mission Statement

The PSSA has evidently not been inclusive in many key respects, with the result that many members have been discriminated against, and have been alienated from and even left the PSSA as a result. However, the PSSA has informally considered itself inclusive, open to all traditions in philosophy, and not requiring any particular philosophical commitments of its members. This informal view needs to be broadened, to make it truly inclusive, and to be effectively communicated and expressed to all members.

We recommend that the PSSA make its values and aims clear by formulating a mission statement. This is also called for by the establishment this year of two new philosophical associations in South Africa, established directly as a result of some members' dissatisfaction with the PSSA. In order to articulate its position as one of a number of associations and to offer reasons for the importance of its continuation, the PSSA should make its sense of its nature, significance to the country, and values clear.

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[14] The recommendation is that the policy address all kinds of discrimination that people of a minority group may be subject to. The thinking here is that the PSSA should not only respond to issues as they arise, but that they should rather have future-oriented policies that would include people with disabilities, and acknowledge people's varying sexual orientations

D. Ethical Guidelines

To effectively implement the recommendations specified above, we further advise the PSSA to adopt ethical guidelines on the conduct and behaviour of members. We would also recommend that the PSSA suggest that departments encourage their staff and students to adhere to these guidelines. These guidelines are adapted from the South African Council of Educators' code of conduct.

Registered members of the PSSA:
1. Acknowledge the noble calling of their profession to teach and train students in the discipline of philosophy and critical inquiry;
2. Acknowledge that the attitude, dedication, self-discipline, ideals, training and conduct of the philosophical community determine the quality of teaching in the discipline;
3. Acknowledge, uphold and promote basic human rights, in their teaching practice and engagement with fellow philosophers and students of philosophy, espousing the spirit of the Constitution of South Africa;
4. Commit themselves, therefore, to do all within their power, through their teaching and research, in exercising their professional duties, to act in accordance with the ideals of the philosophical profession, as expressed in these guidelines; and
5. Commit themselves, also, to act in a proper and becoming way, such that their behaviour does not bring the profession into disrepute.

Conduct: The Philosopher
　A Philosopher:
1. Respects the dignity, beliefs, and constitutional rights of their students, which include the rights to privacy and confidentiality;
2. Acknowledges the uniqueness, individuality, and specific needs of each student, guiding and encouraging each of them to realise their full potentiality within the discipline;
3. Strives to enable students to develop a set of values consistent with the values of the discipline, and the Constitution of South Africa;
4. recognises, where appropriate, students as partners in the knowledge production processes of the discipline;
5. Does not abuse the position their position for financial, political or personal gain;

6. Avoids any form of humiliation, and refrains from any form of abuse, physical or psychological; and

7. Takes reasonable steps to ensure the development and growth of students in a safe and encouraging environment.

As stated above, we encourage the PSSA to adopt these guidelines and principles, to ensure a conducive and healthy community that cultivates and produces philosophers from the pool of students engaged in the journey of teaching and learning within the discipline.

Useful Reading List

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