

On dishonesty and racism in philosophy - some notes on Van den Berg's critique of 'Philosophy from Africa'.

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ABSTRACT

I examine Dr. van den Berg's review article of 'Philosophy from Africa – a text with readings', with a view to setting aside the false allegation concerning the racist intentions of the editors.

On a title and a distorted history

Philosophy from Africa was first published in 1998 under two titles by two publishers, International Thomson Publishing and Routledge (USA). ITP accepted the title 'Philosophy from Africa – a text with readings' with reservations, but Routledge would not accept it, and insisted on their edition carrying the preferred and original title 'The African Philosophy Reader – a text with readings'⁽¹⁾. Oxford University Press bought the rights in 2000, and reprinted, together with Routledge, under the existing titles. The second edition was published in 2003, again by both publishers. On this occasion the editors attempted to change the title of the Oxford edition to their preferred title, 'The African Philosophy Reader – a text with readings', but without success. The then managing editor of Oxford, Arthur Attwell, demurred, citing commercial and other reasons for sticking to the existing title.

The drive to change the title was partly motivated by the wishes of the editors to accommodate a colleague, Prof. Mogobe Ramose, as co-editor of the second edition. Prof. Mogobe Ramose had accepted our invitation to serve as co-editor but would allow his name to appear in this capacity only if Oxford consented to changing the title⁽²⁾.

The reservations which ITP at the time expressed were cogent and insightful. Like Routledge, ITP argued that a text of this kind must clearly reflect its African origins in the title. The concept of African Philosophy must, in the words 'African philosophy', be in the title to be clearly differentiated from European philosophical texts. ITP were not willing to accept the title 'The African Philosophy Reader – a text with readings'. But ITP subsequently accepted the new title which brought about the problem Dr. van den Berg refers to. (More of this shortly.) To be fair to Oxford, the situation inherited from ITP, coupled with fears that a

¹ Coetzee, P. H. and Roux, A.P.J. 1998. (eds.) *The African Philosophy Reader-A text with readings*. Routledge: New York. The second edition was prepared in Germany and published in 2003 by Routledge U.S.A. under the same title. Oxford published their second edition again under the disputed title, also in 2003.

² Oxford refused. The editors then acknowledged Prof. M. B. Ramose's contribution in the 'Acknowledgements'. I quote from page xiv of the second edition: 'Special thanks are also due to our colleague, Professor Mogobe Ramose, for his encouragement, support, and active participation in the entire editorial process.'

change of title would damage the commercial successes of the book, raised problems about financing the second edition, problems which originally led to the compromise of the title.

So what were these problems? In 1994 Unisa created The Research Unit for African Philosophy within the Department of Philosophy. Funds were made available for inviting distinguished African philosophers from all over the world to participate in a number of International Colloquia⁽³⁾ and to assist the university with the task of getting courses in African Philosophy off the ground. At that time there were already academics within and outside the Department of Philosophy who were actively researching various fields in African philosophy. Two African philosophers in particular played a significant advisory role in creating the Unisa courses, Professor Godwin Sogolo from Nigeria and Professor Kwasi Wiredu from Ghana (now South Florida). However, inviting prominent people proved to be a very expensive undertaking, and since the activities of the Research Unit had to be financed for three years, until the end of 1997, the available funds soon shrunk dramatically.

The first draft of ‘Philosophy from Africa – a text with readings’ was completed at the end of 1997. But funds were then rather low, so Unisa was again approached for assistance. The reason for this was that ITP, even in co-operation with Routledge, could not see their way clear of publishing the book without financial assistance from the university. The then Principle of Finance at Unisa generously granted the editors the shortfall, and the book was duly published in 1998. But before this happened, the Department of Philosophy, and the members of the Research Unit, which included the editors, were called on to consider how the project might proceed. At a departmental meeting which was called to consider the future of the project, it was decided to change the title. At this meeting two factions emerged, the stronger (i.e. more numerous) arguing that since the editors were now dependent on financial assistance from the university, a responsibility the department as a whole had to carry, the views of the stronger faction favouring the change had to prevail, as it did in a subsequent vote. This was a faction hostile to the enterprise called African philosophy, though some of its members actually contributed to the book.

Before proceeding, I must note here that hostility to African philosophy was not an unusual phenomenon in South Africa. Richard Bell had encountered this on a recent visit to South Africa. Bell writes: ‘On the point of the phrase ‘African philosophy’ *not registering*, I do not know how many times I said to British colleagues while in the midst of writing this book⁽⁴⁾ of my interest in ‘African philosophy’ only to receive the immediate response: ‘Is there such a thing?’ – this usually ended the conversation, or on a rare occasion it was the beginning of a fruitful conversation. This was also true, to my surprise, of some members of white Eurocentric philosophy faculties encountered in South Africa.’

This statement of the problem of hostility, but noticeably *without Van den Berg’s descent to accusations of racism*, is also the heart of Prof. Ramose’s objection to the title⁽⁵⁾. Ramose writes: ‘It is precisely because of the ‘from’ in the title that the present writer requested that his name should not appear as one of the editors. His argument was that the ‘from’ in the title is not only reminiscent of the ‘for’ in Shutte’s title but that it is also a subtle expression of doubt that philosophy ‘proper’ can ever come from Africa.’ My view, based on my

³ See Roux, A.P.J. and Coetzee, P.H. 1998. (eds.) *Beyond the question of African philosophy - a selection of papers presented at three international colloquia, held at Unisa, 1994-1996*. Pretoria: Unisa press.

⁴ Bell, R.H. 2002. *Understanding African Philosophy – A Cross-cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*. Routledge: New York. p. 152.

⁵ Ramose, M.B. 2003. I doubt, therefore, African Philosophy exists. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 22(2):127.

experiences in a (no longer existent) white Eurocentric department, is that the expression of doubt is not subtle at all. Rather, it is blatant. But who exactly are doubting? Ramose, at least is not fooled about who are racist and who not. He says: ‘‘Yet, the essays contained in this volume more than testify to the existence of African philosophy... . They [the editors] also establish the point that historically, the term African must include people’s of African origin in the diaspora... . [B]y its intent and content the book is yet another loud declaration that ‘I doubt, therefore, African philosophy exists’.’’

It is worth pointing out that there are two senses of the phrases ‘‘...a subtle expression of doubt that philosophy ‘proper’ can ever come from Africa’’ and ‘‘Is there such a thing?’’. The first is relatively innocuous, and is simply the doubt that what African philosophers are doing is strictly not philosophy but rather anthropology, sociology or just folklore. The second sense is that Africans are not rational people i.e. they are not capable of the kind of intellectual rigour commonly associated with philosophers in the West. This sense has been (and probably still is) very prevalent among white intellectuals of apartheid fame. Van den Berg operates with both senses. Ramose, at least, spares the editors the second sense, as is clear from his account of why ‘‘Philosophy from Africa’’, in spite of the title, qualifies as African philosophy.

Now, to continue, Routledge, in all its wisdom, refused to consider the change of title, and vowed that it will go ahead without direct assistance from Unisa to publish its edition under the original title. But Routledge could not proceed without ITP, since it was bound to the latter by legal contract. ITP was not satisfied with the change and the then managing editor, Eloise Wessels, actually called off the project. But they subsequently accepted the deal and published early in 1998, under the auspices of the Research Unit. The title page of the first edition contains the following insertion: ‘‘This book is the product of research done by members of the Research Unit for African Philosophy (RUFAP), and other colleagues from elsewhere, headed by Prof. E. D. Prinsloo of the University of South Africa.’’ The Oxford reprint of 2000 dropped this acknowledgement.

That is how the title change came about. Dr. van den Berg⁽⁶⁾ knows this. She was co-ordinator of the Research Unit for African Philosophy, and fully aware of the problems the project were encountering.

The criticism of the title, on which Van den Berg constructs the charge that the editors construe African Philosophy as ‘‘accidental’’, is a useful starting point for my reply. I have already indicated that there is a historical problem with this charge. Shortly after the publication of the book (under both titles), Dr. van den Berg wrote a review which she submitted to the journal ‘‘Alternations’’ for publication. The then caretaker Head of the Department of Philosophy at Unisa, Prof. Rosalie Finlayson, showed me a copy of this review, which was then in preparation for publication. Dr. van den Berg had shown the review to her, who then approached me with Van den Berg’s request that I consent to its appearance and waive ethical constraints. But this I was unwilling to do. Dr. van den Berg was a participant in the project, but her contribution to the section ‘‘Trends in African Philosophy’’ was rejected by the referees. (The essay by Marlene van Niekerk served as substitute). Ethical constraints require that a participant cannot also be a reviewer. Dr. van den Berg apparently accepted the instruction from Prof. Finlayson, and the review was withdrawn

⁶ Van den Berg, M.E.S. 2003. On historicity, context and the existence of African Philosophy, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 22(3):189-288. This review article was published after I left South Africa for Germany. Had I seen it before it was published, I would have insisted that the accusations of race discrimination be withdrawn.

(then already in proof stage, a fact that created considerable problems for the editor of ‘‘Alternations’’).

Now, on reading the review article as published in the ‘‘South African Journal of Philosophy’’ (see endnote 6), I was struck by the similarity to the first unpublished review. This second published review was adapted in various ways to make it suitable for the second edition. But there are significant differences which touch on the points I wish to raise. In the unpublished review the point about the editor’s alleged perception of African Philosophy as ‘‘accidental’’ was not connected to the title. The point then was that ‘‘the historical, political and cultural forces which gave rise to and constituted African Philosophy as an academic and professional discipline were ... largely ignored’’⁽⁷⁾, a falsity she restates in the adapted review. The criticism of the title and the implications Dr. van den Berg draws from it, are peculiar to the adapted review. In the first review Dr. van den Berg had no objection to the title, and surely she could not, as she was part of the process which led to its acceptance at the Departmental meeting referred to above. Indeed, Dr. van den Berg was one of the people who favoured the change of title. Yet Dr. van den Berg, in criticizing the title, on which criticism she builds a picture of the editors as incompetently compromising their project to ‘‘white’’ European stereotypical perceptions of Africa and Africa’s cultural products, specifically as doubting the existence of African Philosophy, mentions neither the historical struggle over the title, nor the Routledge edition which retained the original title. Worse still, Van den Berg is accusing the editors of racism. The omission just referred to creates the misleading impression, in the adapted review, that the editors were incompetently unaware of the importance of the qualifier ‘‘African’’ in the concept ‘‘African Philosophy’’. She speaks of an ‘‘opportunistic post-1994 ‘seizure’ of African philosophy’’⁽⁸⁾ by these incompetents, yet omits to mention that she was herself a participant, though not a successful contributor, to the project, a fact which surely makes of her one of the seizing opportunists.

As co-ordinator of the Research Unit Dr. van den Berg was surely aware of the constraints under which the contributors were working. The Department of Philosophy, as it was then constituted, was largely a ‘‘white’’ department. Our task was to produce a reader to serve as textbook for the courses which competent authorities like Kwasi Wiredu and Godwin Sogolo were assisting the Department to prepare. ‘‘White’’ contributions to the Introductory sections (each followed by readings drawn from established authorities in the field, most of whom were ‘‘black’’ Africans), were inescapably part of how the project was planned and executed as a product of the predominantly ‘‘white’’ Research Unit. The Unit, under the auspices of Dr. van den Berg, invited ‘‘black’’ and other intellectuals from South Africa and elsewhere, academics who were not members of the Research Unit, to participate in the writing of the Introductions, and where possible, and for those who were willing, space was created. Prof. Joe Teffo (of the University of the North) was in this way as co-writer with Prof. Abraham Roux, made responsible for the section on Metaphysics. Prof. Didier Kaphagawani (of the University of Malawi) likewise co-operated with Prof. J. Malherbe on the section on Epistemology. Prof. Emevwo Biakolo (of the University of Botswana) wrote the first Chapter, ‘‘Categories of cross-cultural cognition and the African condition’’ on his own. Mr. Christo van Staden (of the University of South Africa, then from the Department of Communication), wrote the section on ‘‘Using culture in African contexts’’. And Prof. Augustine Shutte (of the

⁷ Van den Berg, p. 277.

⁸ Van den Berg, p. 277. I have elsewhere written much about the qualifier ‘‘African’’ in the phrase ‘‘African Philosophy’’. See in this regard Coetzee, P.H. 2001, ‘‘A Note on Eze’’, Special Issue of *Philosophical Papers*, 30(3):223-225. See also Coetzee, P.H. 2000, ‘‘Uncovering rationality – a perspective in African thought’’, *South African Journal of Ethnology*, 23(2/3):63-82.

University of Cape Town), who had already published much in the field of African philosophy, got the closing Chapter on Senghor.

By omitting to mention the context I have just briefly sketched, Dr. van den Berg creates the misleading impression that the editors were biased towards ‘whites’, indeed, that they harboured racial motivations of the kind that made apartheid South Africa such an evil place, in their selection of contributors to the first edition. She says: ‘The first edition ... did create the impression that African Philosophy is nothing but the deliberations of a few white philosophers from Unisa ...’⁽⁹⁾, but omits to mention the pre-1994 racial composition of the Department and of the Research Unit, and the efforts that were made to redress this. A book published as a product of research done by the Research Unit will, all other things being equal, and allowing for referee reports, reflect the composition of the Unit and of the invited guests! What is so difficult to understand about that?

The alleged racial intentions of the editors are a point worrying her, though she qualifies her stance with the caveat that it would be unfair to assume that the editors harboured racial intentions. She writes, in response to the relative absence of ‘white’ contributors to the second edition, that ‘the message seems to be that the contributions of white Africans are not quite as African as the contributions of their black counterparts, or even that these contributions do not qualify as African philosophy at all (that, if truth be told, there are actually no white Africans)’⁽¹⁰⁾. I submit that this is another, though somewhat different, accusation of racism. Apparently, then, the editors switched bias, favouring ‘black’ contributors for the second edition, for they seem, *without good reason*, so she argues, to be publishing ‘black’ contributions ‘at the expense of important (‘white’) contributions that appeared in the first edition’⁽¹¹⁾.

If we place the allegation of race discrimination in the context of the allegation about a ‘post-1994 ‘seizure’ of African philosophy’, the implications worsen. Just who seized what from whom? Does Dr. van den Berg mean that African Philosophy is actually the domain of ‘black’ philosophers from Africa, not ‘white’ ones, and how does this square with the accusation that the editors treated the ‘white’ philosophers, whom they allegedly initially favoured, but subsequently dropped, as not quite African, or less so than their ‘black’ counterparts? Does this mean that ‘white’ philosophers should do no African Philosophy? If so, Dr. van den Berg has contradicted herself. Or does she mean that ‘white’ philosophers allegedly harbouring apartheid-like racial intentions ‘seized’ (stole?) something from the rightful owners, i.e. ‘black’ philosophers, to distort it in accordance with their apartheid-like perceptions of Africans? And does this again mean that the book promotes the ideological agenda of apartheid? If all this were true of the participants and of their motivations, where does it leave Dr. van den Berg, who was after all co-ordinator of the Research Unit and participant in the project?

The truth is, and again it is a fact Dr. van den Berg must have been aware of in her capacity as co-ordinator of the Research Unit, the reviews which appeared after the publication of the first edition lamented the absence of the Francophone African philosophers. The first edition was too focussed on African Philosophy as practiced in the Anglophone African world. This was a valid point. The second edition accordingly incorporated many figures from Francophone Africa, and much trouble was taken to translate French articles into English. But problems of space necessitated the elimination of some contributions from Anglophone Africa. Therefore

⁹ Van den Berg, p. 277.

¹⁰ Van den Berg, p. 277.

¹¹ Van den Berg, p. 277.

many of the Anglophone contributions were dropped. This is the reason why far reaching changes were made to the composition of the contributions. The slur of racism is simply unfounded and offensive.

One wonders why the reputations of three international publishing houses are damaged by the allegation that they have contracted with editors harbouring apartheid-like racial intentions, and that they published a work steeped in apartheid's stereotypical perceptions of Africa and Africans? One also wonders why Unisa's reputation for non-racism in the post-1994 era is damaged by the allegation, as well as the reputations of philosophers in other parts of the world who have used the book extensively in their teaching? Richard Bell has made extensive use of the book at Wooster. He writes: " This reader offers excellent critical introductory essays opening each thematic chapter. There are nine thematic chapters with twenty-five individual readings, plus the introductory essays. Its essays are current and selected from among Africa's most important philosophers. It is particularly strong in contemporary moral and political philosophy, which match strengths in my book, but it also selects from among more classical issues reflecting African culture, epistemology, and metaphysics. Of the three readers [the other two recommended by Bell are by E. C. Eze and A. G. Mosley respectively], this has the most critically useful selection on aesthetics and African art . This reader best compliments my book for course use."⁽¹²⁾

The editors draw Dr. van den Berg's attention to the prefaces of both editions. In the second edition the editors wrote the following:

The second edition of this book is a celebration of the success that the Department of Philosophy at the University of South Africa has had with its efforts to advance the cause of African Philosophy in South Africa after the apartheid era.

The apartheid era damaged the cause of African Philosophy in South Africa in exactly the way that the colonial era damaged the cause of African philosophy in Africa. It is no secret that African Philosophy grew more vigorously in regions in Africa where liberation from colonial rule came much sooner than in South Africa. Regional philosophies, distinctly African in their orientation, were already in a developed form before 1994, in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya. These are all post-colonial philosophies, and they contain within themselves powerful reactions to European racism. For black South Africans the release from institutionalised racism, which came as late as 1994, meant – in one significant sense - that they finally had the political power to assert their own identities and to set aside racialised conceptions of themselves. So, when the editors lament the absence of a *developed* regional African Philosophy in South Africa, they have in mind the destructive effects of colonial and white rule; they do not mean, as Dr. van den Berg suggests, that the existing indigenous tradition in South Africa can be ignored for racial reasons ⁽¹³⁾.

As chief editor I disassociate myself from Van den Berg's slur, and I maintain that her allegation damages my reputation as a worker for non-racism at Unisa, the institution I served for 18 years. It also damages my reputation as chief editor of a volume of this kind. I lament the fact that the South African Journal of Philosophy – under the previous editor, Prof. Dirk Louw - did not allow me an opportunity, before the review article was published, to answer Van den Berg's allegation. I am, additionally, surprised that Dr. van den Berg did not inform the Journal of her participation in the project (something the editor of

¹² Bell, p. xiii-xiv.

¹³ Van den Berg, p.279.

‘Alternations’ also did not know), and I am ashamed that ethical constraints suffered with the publication of her review.

References

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