

The Professional Consequences of Political Silence

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I. Introduction

In her recent article, “How Do I Live in This Strange Place?”, Samantha Vice (2010) argues that white South Africans have been morally damaged by their position within the apartheid system, and suggests that, in light of this damage, the appropriate course of action is to “concentrate on recovering and rehabilitating our selves” by cultivating “humility and...(a certain kind of) silence” (Vice 2010: 324). This article has resulted in a stimulating – and sometimes heated – debate, both within and outside of academia in South Africa, since its publication in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*. In the wake of this debate, a consolidated set of formal responses to the article was recently published in the *South African Journal of Philosophy* (SAJP). These papers targeted various levels of Vice’s (2010) argument². While these papers are valuable in disturbing and interrogating selected links in the chain of reasoning that progresses her final call for whites to “turn one’s attention to the self with silence and if possible, humility” (Vice 2010: 338), only McKaiser (2011) and Hook (2011) sufficiently tackle the conceptual integrity of the various qualifiers by which she delimits the kind of silence she advocates. McKaiser is concerned with the moral limits of the political dimensions of silence, while Hook argues that silence is itself a social gesture, the meaning and importance of which is a function of who receives it, rather than just who produces it. These two papers do well to bring to the surface the critical importance of disentangling Vice’s use of the term “silence” from some of its more literal receptions, by carefully considering Vice’s distinctions between different types of political and personal silences. In our view, however, the place of professional silence (the third type of silence Vice refers to) in living as a white South African has not yet been adequately interrogated. This is an

² These papers constitute a special edition, volume 30, issue 4.

especially important omission for at least two reasons. Firstly, Vice's paper is a piece of published professional discourse. By definition then it forms part of "engaging philosophically with one's context with colleagues and in professional settings" (Vice 2010: 336), an instantiation of the type of professional practice that Vice differentiates from political silence in various ways in her paper. Her paper is therefore itself an interesting test case for this distinction. Secondly, Vice notes that her paper represents an attempt at the "professional and personal *breaking* of pernicious whitely silence; 'making strange' what was previously 'just the way things are'" (Vice 2010: 337). It is thus a personal reflection on the limits of the political, the possibilities of the personal, and the imperatives of the professional in thinking about whiteness and "whiteness" in South Africa. Vice's classing of the personal and professional as permissible modes of engagement – modes that are not (at least according to her) in essence political – raises important questions about the relationships between disciplines and their exponents; philosophy and philosophers; and the viability, or even possibility, of precluding the political from the personal and professional dimensions of being white, or thinking about whiteness in South Africa³.

In this paper, we enter the field that emerges from these questions through a focus on the distinction Vice draws between, in particular, political and professional silence. In the discussion that follows, we provide an account for why we view this distinction as unsustainable, before providing a brief empirical demonstration of how the potential problems of whiteness that Vice points out are being negotiated and contested by ordinary South Africans in the course of their everyday political activities. In light of this discussion,

³ The paper is, in other words, a deeply personal engagement with the moral coordinates that (should) shape living as a white South African. Professional silence therefore occupies an interesting position in the triangle of silences that Vice discusses. It is certainly excluded from the "no-go" political realm but is also forcefully linked to the personal, but no less dutiful, imperatives of being a philosopher that engages with her context (Vice 2010).

and in contrast to the possibility of a context-free solution to the difficulties Vice identifies, we advocate for the value of an empirical analytic focus on how such contestations unfold in the flow of everyday post-apartheid life.

II. Political vs. Professional Silence: A Sustainable Distinction?

A crucial point in Vice's argument as we understand it is captured by the quote below, in which she draws a distinction between the political silence that she is advocating, and a professional (or more informal, conversational) silence for which, we take it, she is not calling:

The relevant kind of silence is therefore a political silence, silence in the political realm, rather than a professional silence or the stifling of all conversation with others in which race or privilege, for instance, is the topic...One would remain silent to prevent one's whitely perspective from causing further distortion in the political and public contexts, where whiteness is most problematic and charged (Vice 2010: 337).

By drawing this distinction, Vice gives herself and other philosophers (and, presumably, other academics more generally) license to engage in writing and other professional activities, as well as in personal conversations about race, without falling foul of the silence she prescribes with regard to the political sphere. Importantly, Vice applies this prescription only to white South Africans who are "tainted by the vicious features of whiteness" (340), hence accommodating, for example, the possibility that "younger generations will (appropriately) escape the kind of perplexity I am exploring here" (332). Her prescription is otherwise, however, limited only by the distinction she draws between different types of silence, based on her distinction between political and professional (or personal) activities.

We would question, however, such distinctions – and hence whether the call for silence founded upon them – can be sustained.

The blurring of this distinction can be demonstrated with reference to Vice's own argument: It is clearly evident that calling for white South Africans to adopt a humble silence with respect to the political realm constitutes on its face a political intervention – a move with clear implications for the unfolding of activities in the political sphere. That is, should even a small number of white South Africans who would otherwise have sought to express particular political positions in a public manner decide to follow Vice's directive, the result would be – for better or worse – a change in the political texture of the country. As a result, the ostensibly professional activity in which Vice was engaged in writing the paper to which we are responding has clear political implications – the professional and political cannot be disentangled.

This point can be applied to professional activities more broadly, in at least three respects, relating to 1) the historical and contemporary contexts that have contoured and continue to shape the politics of professional practice, 2) the context of production of professional outputs, and 3) the ways in which such outputs may be appropriated for particular purposes following their production. We discuss each of these in the following paragraphs.

It is not novel to note that professional identities and practices are rooted in disciplines, and that these disciplines have histories and political economies of their own (Foucault 1997). Moreover, the professionalisation⁴ of many disciplines is highly regulated in the present knowledge economy and, as such, is governed by enforceable constitutions and

⁴ By professionalisation we are referring to both the recognition of an academic identity as sanctioned, for example, by the university affiliation tacked to the name of an author in an academic publication, and the 'license' to identify as a profession via affiliation to particular expert bodies.

ethical codes. Even in the case of the so-called non-professional disciplines (philosophy being one such discipline), affiliation to a university or other professional organisation implies compliance with a certain kind of politics.⁵ The political contours of professional identities in the case of disciplines (such as our own discipline of psychology) that are mandated to produce “professionals” are far more pronounced. In South Africa, this point has been made many times, and abundant evidence has been provided for the ways in which psychological theory and practice in the country were born out of racism, and this political trajectory continues to shape professional practice in the present. Thus, the early prioritisation of the “poor white problem” by the Carnegie Commission of 1928 cannot be but implicated in the whiteness that is still reflected in the composition of psychology’s professionals (see Table 1 below). This whiteness also characterises most aspects of the professionalisation of psychologists (Stevens 2002), from the training they receive (Stevens 2001) based on the materials they use (Duncan 2001) to the outputs they produce (Duncan and Bowman 2009).

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

With respect to the context of production, one’s professional activities by necessity involve some kind of determination of what kind of activities it is worth engaging in as a professional in a particular field. For example, professional academics, in developing an ongoing research trajectory and deciding which topic(s) within their field are worthy of their professional attention, are unavoidably influenced by their own personal histories, perspectives, and values. The contention that a professional discourse is easily divorced from

⁵ The mission and vision statements of Rhodes University at <http://www.ru.ac.za/rhodes/introducingrhodes/visionandmission/> provide useful examples of these political parameters for academic identity.

a political (or personal) project has been impugned by philosophers,⁶ and is interrogated as a matter of methodological routine in many social scientific studies. In fact, assessing the degree to which the researcher is aware or reflexive of the ways in which his/her “involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 228) has become a widespread mechanism for evaluating the quality of social scientific research. Of course, there is much debate on what constitutes “involvement,” and therefore on the kinds of reflexivity required to appropriately display an awareness of the way in which the political position of the researcher is present in the professional outputs of the research (Parker 1994). It is virtually beyond dispute, however, that professional outputs cannot be extricated from the political contexts in which they are produced.

In light of the above discussion, and if we accept Vice’s argument that “any voice [for white South Africans] in the public sphere would inevitably be tainted by the vicious features of whiteness” (Vice 2010: 340), it follows that white South African social scientists will inevitably to some degree import their “whitely” perspectives and values into their professional activities. Thus, if we accept that one’s perspectives and values embody a political standpoint – a position on matters of contestation particularly, but not only, with respect to the way a society should be governed – then professional activities unavoidably have political underpinnings and implications.

With respect to the appropriation of professional outputs following their production, it is clear that professionals cannot retain full control over the uses to which their work is put once they have made it publicly available – for example (in the case of academic products)

⁶ Nietzsche’s insistence that “...[h]owever far man [sic] may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography” (Nietzsche 1984 [1878]: 238) exemplifies this point.

through publication or presentation at professional meetings. It is well known, for example, that although Albert Einstein condemned the use of the atomic bomb against Japan,⁷ and warned of the consequences of the wide scale production of nuclear weapons,⁸ his theoretical work was central in facilitating the development of the technology upon which such weapons depend. Closer to home, it is clear from even a cursory examination of political discourse in South Africa that all manner of research findings are recruited to support or undermine particular political interventions, with or without the support of the professionals who produced the findings – and this includes research relating to the matters of race and redress for which Vice’s argument is most particularly salient. An example of this can be seen in the reception of a recent report on the continuing racial dimensions of inequality and poverty in South Africa (Leibbrandt et al. 2010), which was produced by researchers at the University of Cape Town’s Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The findings of this research were quickly seized upon for political ends, as shown by the claims of Athol Trollip (the opposition party Democratic Alliance’s parliamentary leader at the time) that the report demonstrated the inadequacy of the ANC government’s socio-economic policies.⁹

While the examples provided above focus primarily on the academic domain in which Vice and we are embedded, the points that they illustrate could be applied in much the same way to activities in a range of other professional domains. Whatever work one does, to the

⁷ Einstein stated in a 1953 letter to a Japanese philosopher who had criticised his role in the development of nuclear weapons, “I have always condemned the use of the atomic bomb against Japan” (see Nathan and Norden 1960: 589).

⁸ Clarke (1971: 698) quotes Einstein as warning in 1944, “when the war is over, then there will be in all countries a pursuit of secret war preparations with technological means which will lead inevitably to preventative wars and to destruction even more terrible than the present destruction of life.”

⁹ See <http://www.iol.co.za/business/business-news/gap-between-rich-and-poor-in-south-africa-widens-1.695882>

extent that it is produced within a particular discipline, and is (at least in part) a product of one's own decisions regarding what kind of work is worth pursuing, one's professional outputs will reflect a particular political standpoint. And, to the extent that one's professional outputs are in any way relevant to issues being contested in the political realm, these outputs could be appropriated in the service of particular political ends. The professional is, unavoidably, political. Moreover, this can further be extended to the realm of personal activities and conversations which, following similar reasoning, can be shown to have both political underpinnings and (at least potentially) political consequences.

We are also aware that our arguments regarding the political underpinnings and consequences of professional and personal activities could be applied to our own work and activities – including the work we are doing in writing this paper. Thus, our work in this regard 1) could be taken as reflecting our particular disciplinary roots and socialisation in the field of psychology (and the social sciences more broadly), and as implicating the political positioning of these disciplines, 2) could be seen as a reflection of our own personal and political values, given that by writing this response we are treating Vice's arguments as important enough to respond to, and 3) could, regardless of our intentions in writing it, be appropriated as a defense of white South Africans' right to speak out in any way they please.

In the face of the foregoing arguments, white South Africans, including ourselves, are faced with a choice: On the one hand, they can either be completely silent in every way – which, even if it were practically sustainable, would effectively serve to eliminate any contribution that white South Africans could make to society. On the other hand, they can speak out, while accepting doing so may have consequences in the political realm, and that their involvement may (if we accept Vice's argument) serve to reproduce a “whitely”

perspective¹⁰. This is a fraught state of affairs, and one that is evident in the question that serves as the title and topic of Vice's article. However, it is a state of affairs that we must all grapple with one way or another in living our lives as South Africans. It is our contention, though, that how we deal with it cannot be prescribed in advance by, for example, a decision to adopt (particular "types" of) silence across a range of possible future situations (most particularly within the public sphere). Instead, it depends on the contingent, moment-by-moment choices we make in each new and unique situation, based on the details of the situation as we (and others) interpret them (cf. Wittgenstein's [1958] concept of "finitism").¹¹ Again, this can be applied to our own actions in writing this paper: Obviously we have chosen to do so despite the potential pitfalls described in the previous paragraph. It is in this spirit that we turn now to a brief empirical illustration of the interactional negotiation of the place of white South Africans in the post-apartheid society. This example demonstrates how everyday contestations around race, and whiteness in particular, relate to Vice's attempt to distinguish between different types of silence, and the contingent, situated, and participant-administered nature of decisions about whether and when white silence would be appropriate.

III. Contested Whiteness in Political Activities: A Brief Empirical Illustration

The empirical illustration we undertake in this section focuses on an exchange that took place on a South African radio station (Kaya FM) in 2008, which was recorded as part of a broader study of the ways in which racial categories become relevant in interactional settings in post

¹⁰ McKaiser (2011) advances what seems to be a more nuanced understanding of the role of whites in the political sphere. He cautions that political silence by whites may indeed undermine the anti-racist project but that whites should remain careful and self-reflective about the ways in which their whiteness and "whiteness" continues to privilege them in post-apartheid South Africa.

¹¹ See Heritage (1984: 120-129) for a discussion of finitism with respect to human action.

apartheid South Africa.¹² This interaction is drawn from a discussion of the controversy surrounding the proposed disbanding of the Scorpions crime-fighting unit and the incorporation of its duties and personnel into the regular police force. Those familiar with this controversy may recall that the Scorpions had been accused of political motivations in deciding whether, and in which cases, investigations and potential prosecutions should be pursued against political figures accused of corruption – and these accusations were a primary basis for the proposed disbanding of the unit. On the show as an invited guest was Hugh Glenister, a wealthy (white) businessman who was opposed to the disbanding of the Scorpions, and was using his own money to fund a legal intervention aimed at blocking the government’s attempts to disband the unit. Clearly, then, this was a highly politically charged matter. What was not as clear, however, was whether Glenister’s racial positioning was a relevant feature of his intervention: In a lengthy interview preceding the transcript shown below, neither Glenister nor the host of the show had given any indication that his actions represented a racialised perspective in any respect, but as the transcript¹³ shows, a listener (via a text message read on air by the host) suggests otherwise:

¹² See Whitehead (2011a) for further analysis of this exchange, and Whitehead (2010; 2011b; forthcoming) for further details and findings relating to the broader study.

¹³ The transcript was produced using the conventions developed primarily by Gail Jefferson, which are described in Jefferson (2004). These conventions involve the use of various symbols to represent features of speech production, including underlining of words (or portions thereof) to indicate that a speaker has placed emphasis on them; numbers in parentheses to represent pauses in speech production (measured in seconds, with a single period in parentheses representing a hearable pause of one tenth of a second or less); and dashes to indicate that a speaker has cut off the production of a word or sound. For the sake of brevity, the details of the roles of these features of speech production are not examined in the following analysis, and they are not crucial to the points we wish to make for the purposes of this paper. However, the transcription symbols have been retained for the benefit of potentially interested readers.

[18 - Kaya FM 5-5-08]

1 H: Okay and this one, "John your fairly unknown guest is
2 just a white attention seeker. .h He can use the money
3 that he amassed because of apartheid to better the lives
4 of many people, .h instead of this cheap publicity
5 stunt. .h He can use his riches to make good the victims
6 of apartheid he has benefitted from. .h The Scorpions
7 must go." Okay. (.) One listener .h who's- you('re)
8 doing completely the wrong thing, .h uh: Hugh Glenister
9 (a) response?
10 G: .hhh=pt=.hh (0.2) U:m=hh okay. hhh (.) The wealth I've
11 created in actual fact has (.) actually occurred after
12 (0.6) u:m: (.) nineteen ninety four. .hhh U:m: (.) and
13 (.) I was one of those who fought (.) for the very (.)
14 change that we have in South Africa. .hh Um: (.) the one
15 concern I have is that I fought very hard against the
16 previous bunch of bullies in the eighties, .hh a::n:d
17 the current behavior (0.2) o:f certain people within the
18 government i- (.) reminds me so much of the eighties,
19 and that scares me. .hh And that's why I took the action
20 that I took.
21 H: Okay, Dumi is calling from Protea. Hi Dumi?

By claiming that Glenister is "just a white attention seeker" (line 2) and "fairly unknown" (line 1), the listener portrays Glenister's actions as being motivated by a desire to gain attention on the part of one who would otherwise not be capable of doing so – and as representing a specifically "white" perspective in the process. This portrayal is reinforced by the listener's subsequent claims about the source of Glenister's wealth, and his/her positioning of Glenister as a previous and continuing beneficiary of apartheid (see lines 2-6).

Thus, in Vice's terms, the listener treats Glenister's actions as "tainted by whiteness," and hence completely lacking in merit.

After being invited by the host to respond, Glenister resists the listener's racialised positioning of him. He does so by challenging the listener's assumption that his wealth was amassed *during*, as opposed to *after*, apartheid (lines 10-12), claiming to have been an active opponent of apartheid (lines 13-14), and drawing a connection between the actions of the apartheid regime and those of the current government (lines 16-18). By doing so, he recasts his intervention as a principled stand against "bullies" (line 16) in government rather than a cynical ploy for attention reflecting a "whitely" position on his part.

Should Glenister have remained silent, or did his intervention (notwithstanding its ultimate lack of success) represent a worthwhile contribution to the debate on this matter? Was Glenister exhibiting a "whitely" perspective in his actions in this regard, or did his response serve precisely to disrupt the ease with which the caller elided his "whiteness" with apartheid-benefit and post-apartheid publicity-seeking? While we may have our own opinions on these questions, as might other observers, there can be no final, context-free word on how they should be settled. Instead, they are questions for the *participants* of any given interaction to decide on – and while academics (whatever their disciplinary identification may be) may "join in" as participants on occasion, our interventions into such contestations are no less political than those of other participants. Thus, regardless of any principled statements we might make on such matters, the "Hugh Glenisters," radio listeners, and other members of society will have to decide, in any given instance, whether they should remain silent or speak out, whether another's voice is expressing a valid position or is "tainted by whiteness" – and even if academics do make statements in this regard, their interventions will become just another factor that participants such as Glenister and the listener may use (or not) in deciding what action to take when faced with questions such as these. That is, Glenister could have

(had it been available at the time) read Vice's argument and decided based on doing so that he should remain silent. Alternatively, the listener could have invoked Vice as an authority to support his claims that that Glenister's intervention was illegitimate. And it is worth noting that either of these possibilities represents an alteration to the political realm resulting from a professional philosophical product, thus illustrating again the link between the professional and the political we discussed above. However, in such circumstances, it is ultimately the actors in every unique scene who will decide whether, and how, a call for silence (or otherwise) should be applied. In light of this, rather than attempting to offer prescriptions that could be applied to all possible future relevant situations, we could focus our analytic attention on working to understand the solutions (imperfect as they may be) that participants themselves are producing in particular everyday instances.

IV. Concluding comments

In this response, we have focused on two related points. The first is the difficulty in distinguishing between professional, political and personal interventions – and, as we have noted, the argument we have made in this regard can be reflexively applied to our own contribution to this discussion. We have used a professional academic mode of writing, and have drawn on academic sources and analytic methodologies that are part of the tools of our professional practice, but we remain aware of the potential political consequences of our argument, and are ever cognisant of our positioning as white South Africans (and hence as being implicated in Vice's argument) in writing it. This relates to the second main point of our response: Given the difficulties in separating professional, political and personal activities, we have demonstrated the value of an empirical analytic focus sensitive to the situated ways of being that people – be they identifiable as professionals, political or other

public figures, or simply ordinary citizens – are producing in grappling with the contestations and complexities of post-apartheid life. Such a focus does not guarantee solutions to the fraught position of white people in South African society, but it may offer revealing insights into how people *are* living “in this strange place.”

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Table 1: Registered professional psychologists in South Africa by race, 2010

Professional Psychologists in South Africa		
Race	Number	%
African	588	8.6
Chinese	1	0.0
Coloured	201	2.9
Indian	371	5.4
White	3,815	56.0
(blank)	1,840	27.0
Total	6,816	100.0

Source: HPCSA (2010)