

BOOK REVIEW

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Sit Racist, Let's Talk A review of Eusebius McKaiser's *Run Racist Run*

The ambitions of a public intellectual

*In his recent book, **Run Racist Run**, Eusebius McKaiser, a prominent member of the 'public intellectual Black literati',¹ sets aside his desire to write about issues relating to illness, death and the meaning of life,² in order to write a second book about race and racism. He wishes he were free to write about other issues, but he cannot do this 'while the country is burning'.³ Writing about race is his 'burden';⁴ it is his 'duty'.⁵*

The aim of the book is to address issues that have not 'been discussed in any public discourse on race'.⁶ In particular, he wants to 'to give the fullest possible exposition of the manifestations of racism in South Africa'.⁷ This is necessary because without an 'overlapping consensus about what the world we all live in *looks* like', it is impossible to 'truly think through the potential solutions for the most urgent social challenges we face as a society'.⁸

Such are his motives and aims, as ambitious as they are admirable.

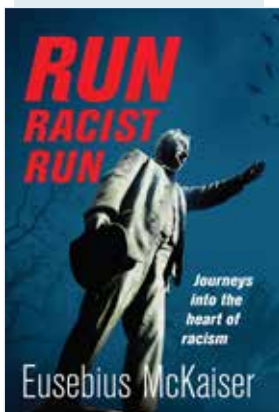
Philosophy, or sophistry and rhetoric?

What type of book has he written? He tells us that he wants the work to contribute to the lives of ordinary people.⁹ But, how does he try to do this?

He begins with a single-line paragraph: 'I wish this was not an anthology on racism'.¹⁰ So, he intends the 11 short chapters to be connected by the idea of racism, and he thinks that his work has a literary quality. This is reflected in his use of 'storytelling as a heuristic device'.¹¹ He comments on the state of the country by recounting the experiences of various people, including his own. This suggests a kind of literary-sociology, which though having an 'agenda'¹² is not self-consciously 'activist'.¹³ He also aspires to be philosophical, with the heart of the book focused on conceptual analysis—that is, on what it means to be racist. Whilst he writes emotively, '[m]erely emoting won't help us to eliminate racism', so he asks his readers to hold him 'to the standards of sound argument that you find in analytic philosophy'.¹⁴

Taken together, we seem to have a *cri de cœur* that aims to be an ambitious mix of literature, sociology, intellectual activism, political theory and philosophy.¹⁴

This way of writing sometimes makes it difficult to come to grips with his ideas. Because it is not always clear who he is addressing—philosophers, sociologists, political theorists, the literati, or the public—the standards by which we must judge his arguments are not clear. This style of writing brings to mind the criticism that philosopher Martha Nussbaum has directed at the theorist Judith Butler:



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Butler gains prestige in the literary world by being a philosopher; many admirers associate her manner of writing with philosophical profundity. But one should ask whether it belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric. Ever since Socrates distinguished philosophy from what the sophist and the rhetoricians were doing, it has been a discourse of equals who trade arguments and counter-arguments without any obscurantist sleight-of-hand.¹⁵

Like Butler, McKaiser has admirers. Ndumiso Ngcobo, for example, says that his 'brain is still tingling from the aftershock of the jolts it received from McKaiser's pen'.¹⁶ The book may be worthy of this high praise, but in what way does it jolt? Is it through in-depth analysis and rigorous treatment of ideas, or is it through persuasive but shallow argument?

As a preliminary point, it is no defence to a charge of sophistry to identify his eclectic method. His aim is to 'give the fullest possible exposition of the manifestations of racism in South Africa' and this requires a definition of racism. The book is inspired by a 'shift' in his 'racial politics',¹⁷ that is, by his self-perceived failure in the past to grasp certain 'features of racism'.¹⁸ His aim, therefore, is to analyse philosophically the nature of racism for the purpose of describing the different forms in which it manifests. This is why he tells us to judge him by the standards we expect from philosophers.

Philosophy, contrarily, is a joint effort to arrive at truth and at an understanding of ourselves, others and the word.

So, what do we find in *Run Racist Run*? Do we find philosophy or sophistry? Though difficult to spot the differences between these methods, the foreword provides a hint. His arguments, we are told, are those of 'a World Masters Debate Champion'.¹⁹ Though intended as a compliment, this suggests an argumentative method closer to sophistry than philosophy.

Debate is about persuasion. It is adversarial, it is a contest. There is one goal: victory. Winning is all that matters, even if it is at the expense of analytical depth, rigour and consistency. Philosophy, contrarily, is a joint effort to arrive at truth and at an understanding of ourselves, others and the word. Philosophers get heated, true, but it is understood that what matters is not victory or who is right, but *what* is right.

The hint in the foreword is confirmed by McKaiser's typical method of argument. It has three parts. First, he tells the story of someone who has experienced discrimination. Second, he introduces a concept by weaving it into the story. Third, he assumes, asserts or tries to justify with cursory analysis the correctness of the concept (often by appealing to the emotional weight of the story).

This method can be effective, as it can be persuasive. But, it is a template for how to argue rhetorically. Truth is often assumed and his ideas are rarely properly interrogated. It belongs to the school of sophistry. This is not necessarily a criticism. Effective intellectual activism can take many forms. Rather, it is to say that he does not meet the standards by which he wants to be judged. An example of how he applies this method will illustrate its un-philosophical nature. More importantly, it reveals the analytical weakness of his method and the practical implications of this weakness. As we shall see, sophistry that masquerades as philosophy can make for bad activism.

Telling a story, followed by the assertion of a moral fact

In an early chapter titled, 'Biko Lied', McKaiser tells the story of his encounter with a young white man, who enquired about his latest writing project, which happens to have been this book. After explaining its aims, the person questioned its relevance, suggesting that race is no longer an issue in South Africa. After taking this person 'to the cleaners', he abruptly asserts that he did this person 'a favour', for 'black people' do not 'have a duty to convince whites that racism is a reality'. As a white person, it is 'a bonus to have a black person explaining "race" to you'. His justification for this moral claim is that black people 'need to get on with dismantling racism's legacy'.²⁰ Bigots cannot be 'lazy' and ask for help; they must 'think' for and amongst themselves and 'journey' out of their bigotry 'on their own'.²¹

The story is interesting, important and probably reflective of the misguided attitudes of many white South Africans. But, it has little analytical relevance. At best, it sets the stage for analysis. This is important, but it must not be confused for analysis itself. More importantly, for my purposes, is the idea that piggy-backs on the story—that is, the claim that black people do not have a duty to engage with white people about the nature of racism and the continued relevance of race in South Africa.

He asserts the truth of this idea confidently. But, be aware, it is controversial.

The scope and the content of the duties we owe to ourselves and to others sits at the heart of questions about ethics and morality. Many people, over thousands of years, have thought and written about these issues. Measured against 'the standards of sound argument that we find in analytic philosophy', a casual assertion that this duty does not exist is unacceptable.

Moreover, as we shall see, a problem with superficial analysis of this type is highlighted by the fact that on his account of the nature of racism—which I consider later—this moral claim cannot be sustained.

A feature of liberalism that is relevant to this review, which is grounded in this metaphysical commitment, is the idea that despite our unique perspectives of the world, we can share our experiences, ideas and reasons with each other.

The shift to identity politics

Before I explain why it is unsustainable, it will be useful at this stage to develop a point alluded to above, namely, the fact that McKaiser wrote this book in part because of a shift in his racial politics. This shift is towards something resembling 'identity politics'. The shift, however, is only partial. As he notes, he is at heart an egalitarian liberal. There is a difficulty here, for identity politics and liberalism have antithetical metaphysical commitments. His commitment to both, therefore, produces tensions and contradictions in his

work—such as the contradiction between the moral claim discussed in the previous section and his account of the nature of racism that I will discuss in the next section.

Before dealing with this directly, let me explain some of the more important differences between the ideologies of identity politics and liberalism.

Liberalism commits to a particular view of human beings. Despite their many differences and shades, liberals agree that individuals are free—though each of us is born into circumstances not of our choosing, our capacity to think, reflect and abstract means that we are not ultimately *subject* to our desires, passions and drives. We can choose to affirm them, according them value, or deny them value by resisting

them. A feature of liberalism that is relevant to this review, which is grounded in this metaphysical commitment, is the idea that despite our unique perspectives of the world, we can *share* our experiences, ideas and reasons with each other. We do this is by interacting with each other—through word or deed—as rational beings. Much of what McKaiser says in the book is consistent with this view.

Adherents of identity politics reject the basic metaphysical commitment underlying liberalism. They deny that we are free, instead subscribing to a kind of determinism—the belief that our actions are automatic consequences of processes, of forces, external to our free will. Further, unlike liberals, they believe that we are essentially unequal, with all interactions characterised by force or domination. Language, they say, does not unite us—it embodies these unequal relations. They believe that our thought-processes and thoughts are the products of what happens to us. Our values, principles and reasons are not the result of reflection, so they cannot be deliberately shared. *You either get it or you don't. It is beyond your control.* Some of what McKaiser says in the book is reflective of these ideas.

At times, it is conceptually confused, metaphysically unsound and contradictory. In what follows, therefore, I try to reconstruct his arguments in order to get at his underlying point.

The fact that he is a liberal, but embraces some of the ideas of identity politics, means that his ideas often contradict each other. In the next two sections, I explore one of these contradictions.

The nature of racism: a liberal definition

Black people do not have a duty to explain the nature of racism and the relevance of race to white people. The journey out of bigotry must be taken alone. So asserts McKaiser. Both ideas are wrong; and neither can be reconciled with his account of the nature of racism.

His account of the nature of racism, we are told, entails a shift from an action-based conception of racism, applied in *A Bantu in My Bathroom*, to a character-based conception.²² His exposition of this distinction is unclear. At times, it is conceptually confused, metaphysically unsound and contradictory. In what follows, therefore, I try to reconstruct his arguments in order to get at his underlying point.

Since at least Aristotle, some have argued that to understand an action, we must grasp the values, principles and reasons that inspire it. To understand *what* a person is doing, we must consider *why* they are doing it. For example, if I see you leaving your office, I can only understand your movements if I know your reasons for leaving. 'What are you doing?' will be met with 'I want to get coffee'. In philosophical terms 'why' has explanatory priority to 'what', so in any description of an action 'why' is 'what'. To put it another way, unless we know why someone moves their arms and legs or projects sounds with their vocal chords—that is, their reasons for doing so—we cannot know what they are doing. So, in the example just given, *what* the person is doing when leaving their office *is* getting coffee.

This idea has found many powerful advocates, from Thomas Aquinas to Elizabeth Anscombe and John Finnis. Whilst McKaiser obscures matters by suggesting that what we do reveals who we are deep down on the 'inside',²³ his point is just this Aristotelian one. On this approach, to determine whether an act is racist, we cannot just describe what people do. We must examine the values, principles and reasons that inspire the act. We must ask why they are acting in that particular way.

When their words or deeds are inspired by ‘ill-will’ or the ‘narcissistic’ idea of racial superiority, these words or deeds will be racist.²⁴

There are three points to note about this definition, which I try to develop in the remainder of this section. First, it is essentially correct. Second, it is not different from his earlier definition. Third, it is a liberal definition.

Since racism is characterised in this way, the moral culpability of racists is different to those people who act for reasons that are grounded in or reliant on the idea of racial superiority, but are unaware of this fact.

This account of the nature of racism, as reconstructed, is essentially correct. It is characterised by action inspired by principles, values and reasons that have at their core the notion that some races are superior to others. Moreover, this idea must be more or less self-consciously held by a person when acting. In other words, there must be ‘ill-will’ or ‘narcissism’ on the part of the actor.

This does not mean that we cannot have values, principles or reasons that are in ways of which we are unaware reliant on some notion of racial superiority.

Rather, it means that racism is characterised by a *subjective awareness of* and *commitment* to the idea that some races are better than others.²⁵

Since racism is characterised in this way, the moral culpability of racists is different to those people who act for reasons that are grounded in or reliant on the idea of racial superiority, but are unaware of this fact. The latter group may be culpable for their failure to reflect upon and rid themselves of these values, principles and reasons. In some cases, this might evidence, but not necessarily prove, a general belief in the idea of racial superiority. If so, their actions will be racist. That said, whilst we must reflect on our principles, values and reasons, the culpable failure to do so is not synonymous with endorsing,²⁶ that is, affirming in one’s action, these values, principles and reasons. Only the latter is racist.

How does this account differ from the one he previously offered, namely, that racism is characterised by ‘arbitrary and irrational acts of discrimination on the basis of race’?²⁷ This is not clear.

His point in *Run Racist Run* is that we cannot know whether an action is racist unless we know why the person acted in the way that he did. Whilst ‘why’ has analytical priority over ‘what’, action is still central to this conception of racism, for only actions based on values, principles and reasons that are reliant on the idea of racial superiority are racist. Like his earlier account, this definition requires action for someone *to be racist*. Racism is always action-based, but action can only be understood by examining the principles, values and reasons that inspire it.²⁸ This definition is the same as his earlier one. It appears to be different to McKaiser only because he now has a better grasp of the nature of action.

This definition of racism is liberal. Though inspired by identity politics, it bears almost no relation to it. It is liberal for three reasons.

First, by situating ‘relationality’²⁹ and action at the heart of the definition, he rejects the idea that one can be a racist without acting. A desire to punch someone does not make you guilty of assault. Similarly, unless thoughts are *affirmed in action* one is not racist. The idea that a moral concept like racism is essentially tied to action is a liberal one.

Second, by placing subjective awareness of one's commitment to the idea of racial superiority at the core of his definition, he embraces a key tenet of liberalism. Just as we are not morally culpable for the thoughts that burst ex nihilo into our trains of thought, but only for what we do with them, we can only be morally responsible if we act on the basis of choice—in this case, if our actions reflect our affirmation of the idea of racial superiority.

Third, because racism is tied up with ideas, it can be 'unlearned'.³⁰ As rational creatures, we can be reasoned with and 'taught' to think in a way that rejects the idea of racial superiority. This emphasis on reason and its capacity to combat injustice sits at the heart of liberalism.

The duty to engage with racists

I am now in a position to justify my claim that two of McKaiser's most important assertions—that black people do not have a duty to explain the nature of racism and its relevance to white people, and that the journey out of bigotry is one that bigots must make alone—are wrong.

If racism is characterised by actions inspired by particular values, principles and reasons, the only way to dismantle it is to target these beliefs. We must rid people of their commitment to or reliance on ideas of racial superiority. Essential to the fight against racism is *changing the minds* of people who hold such ideas. They can only change their minds, however, if they think about and reject these ideas—that is, if they commit to a process of thinking and moral consideration. Since thinking is just talking to your-self—explaining ideas to and arguing with your-self—dialogue is essential to dismantling racism.

Of course, white people must commit to dialogue, internally and amongst one other. But, black people will improve the quality of dialogue, in all its forms, by sharing their experiences and, where necessary and possible, by explaining the nature of racism and the continued relevance of race in South Africa. For individuals who do not 'get it',³¹ explanation from and argument by others is essential—it is the only way to convert the racist—which means that everyone has a *duty* to talk with others.

A lonely journey: the illiberal nature of identity politics

Why does McKaiser fail to see that his own definition of racism means that the difficult project of dismantling racism will only succeed if all people—including black people—commit to interpersonal dialogue?

An explanation may be the fact that he has shifted to identity politics, but is still committed to core liberal principles. Whilst these principles force their way into his definition of racism, they are jettisoned when he asserts that black people have no duty to explain racism and the relevance of race to white people. He neglects these principles because he has begun to internalise certain principles of identity politics. Whilst liberals embrace human interaction as the source of so much that is good, identity politicians are suspicious of it. Whilst liberals see it as an essential means for promoting social and political justice, identity politicians see it as essentially coercive, so denounce it as irrelevant or as a way of entrenching injustice.

Of course, white people must commit to dialogue, internally and amongst one other. But, black people will improve the quality of dialogue, in all its forms, by sharing their experiences and, where necessary and possible, by explaining the nature of racism and the continued relevance of race in South Africa.

It is because McKaiser has started to internalise the notions that reasons and experience cannot be shared, that dialogue is at best irrelevant and at worst oppressive, and that racism can only successfully be fought by the oppressed and their ‘allies’ who just ‘get it’, that he does not see the necessity of comprehensive, inclusive, and ongoing dialogue to the project of dismantling racism.

But, he is wrong. Identity politics is wrong. This approach will not work. Identity politics fails to see that racism is *our* problem. It is our problem not because we have ‘overlapping interests’ that make ‘strategic cooperation’ wise.³² We are not ‘allies’. This is not a war. We are not islands unto ourselves—absolutely sovereign, essentially different, parties—moved by self-interest alone. Rather, we are equals in a common struggle. Racism is *our* problem simply because this struggle is for *our humanity*.

After all, to a true identity politician—something McKaiser is not—victory can only be assured when the racist is silenced, jailed or banished: ‘Run racist run!’

The journey out of bigotry is a shared one. We cannot ‘chuckle’, say ‘fuck it’ and carry on ‘snogging’, allowing racists to ‘stew’ in their ‘ignorance’.³³ Sometimes we must take time out from what we would prefer to be doing, what we should be entitled to do, and tackle the horrors of racism. As frustrating and unfair as this may be, we all have to help liberate others from their ideas of racial superiority. This is not because we should be ‘generous’, but because this is our duty. Not all duties

are voluntary or arise in circumstances of our own making. Some arise by virtue of what it means to be a person, coupled with facts and events for which we bear no responsibility. Engaging the racist in dialogue, where necessary and possible, is such a duty.

To argue otherwise is unthinkable to a liberal. For her, freedom, dignity and equality can only be realised when we sit down and talk with the racist. *We have to change his mind*. To someone shifting to identity politics, however, it might make sense to dismiss the idea that we have a duty to argue with and persuade our fellow citizens. After all, to a true identity politician—something McKaiser is not—victory can only be assured when the racist is silenced, jailed or banished: ‘Run racist run!’

Story-telling: still worth a read

Whilst public intellectuals might wish to draw on a variety of disciplines when they contemplate out loud, this comes with risks. One risk is that the work ultimately fails to be literature, philosophy, political theory, sociology, or anything at all. Instead, it becomes sophistry or rhetoric, which on its face may be persuasive and might score points in a debate, but on closer inspection is revealed to lack depth, rigour and, crucially, coherence. Unfortunately, on more than one occasion, *Run Racist Run* fails to avert this risk.

Despite this failing, many of the essays are worth reading.

His best work is found in the second half of the book, where he has put down the heavier ‘philosophical tools’,³⁴ instead focusing on stories. His story-telling is good: crisp, emotional and humorous. It is more effective than his conceptual analysis in conveying the points that he wants to make—some of which he notes are common sense rather than ‘rocket science’.³⁵

He explores the idea of shame, informs about the implications of ‘black tax’, and concludes with a strong essay about xenophobia. He makes good points about the

importance, in politics and in our ordinary lives, of mixing passion with principle. His essay on Steve Hofmeyr and Max du Preez, though not without faults, observes that racism manifests in different forms.

The same can be said about his discussion of the relevance of perception and pre-judgments when evaluating individual merit. And, the essay in which he distinguishes the standard of proof required in criminal cases from that used in daily life—though diminished by jumps in logic and fragile conceptual and normative analysis—makes good points about what can reasonably be expected of us when we interact with others.

Sit racist, let's talk

It is important to understand why his stories are effective, and why he should not shy away from the use of story-telling as a political device.

The political theorist Hannah Arendt observes that 'no philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.'³⁶ Why is this? The telling of stories is so powerful because it *shares experiences* with the reader or the listener. Stories enable us, through the exercise of our imaginative faculties, to put ourselves in the shoes of a person who has faced discrimination, understand their point of view, and empathise with them—that is, experience their suffering as our own.

This does not mean that we—I—cannot share the burdens of the struggle against racism, for its nature requires us to partner in our efforts to rid society of this evil.

Our capacity to empathise, Edwin Cameron rightly notes, 'is not unique to black people in racist societies, or to women in gender-oppressed societies, or to lesbians and gays. It is available to everyone . . . simply because each of us is uniquely different' and have in some way been ill-treated and alienated because of something about us or because of who we are. Thus, for us to experience the world *as* others do, for personal experiences to become shared experiences, we must 'listen carefully' to what others have to say.³⁷

If our experiences of ill treatment and alienation are rare or have never been acute, we may have to listen very carefully. Sometimes very, very carefully. This is why white people, especially men, have a duty to sometimes sit back and listen to the experiences of black people and women. This does not mean that we—I—cannot share the burdens of the struggle against racism, for its nature requires us to partner in our efforts to rid society of this evil.³⁸ Rather, it means that the position of some relative to others might make it more difficult, but never impossible, to grasp what others suffer on a daily basis.

Given the natural capacity to share our experiences and reasons with others,³⁹ the reality that every one of us inescapably cares about the truth,⁴⁰ and the fact that truth is reconciliation, the only way to dismantle racism in its entrenched entirety is to sit down with the racist and to *converse* with him—that is, to *live and transform together* with him.

So, racist, don't run. Sit, let's talk.

NOTES

- 1 Eusebius McKaiser, *Run Racist Run: Journeys into the Heart of Racism* (2015) at vii.
- 2 *Ibid* 2 and 6.
- 3 *Ibid* at 15.
- 4 *Ibid* at vii.

- 5 *Ibid* 11.
- 6 *Ibid* at 18.
- 7 *Ibid* at 12.
- 8 *Ibid* at 11-2.
- 9 *Ibid* 11.
- 10 *Ibid* at 1.
- 11 *Ibid* 12.
- 12 *Ibid* at 6.
- 13 *Ibid* at 10.
- 14 *Ibid* at 11.
- 15 'The Professor of Parody' (http://perso.uclouvain.be/mylene.botbol/Recherche/GenreBioethique/Nussbaum_NRO.htm, accessed on 6 January 2016).
- 16 *Supra* n 1: see the back-cover.
- 17 *Ibid* at 2.
- 18 *Ibid* at 65.
- 19 *Ibid* at x.
- 20 *Ibid* at 17-21.
- 21 *Ibid* at 95-109.
- 22 *Ibid* at 2.
- 23 *Ibid* at 64-69.
- 24 *Ibid* at 67-71.
- 25 in later essays he says that racism need not be 'intentional' (112). He does not mean that we can be racist when we don't affirm the idea of racial superiority in action. Rather, racism is not limited to 'overt' (120) or violent action. The examples he gives of unintentional racism entail subjective awareness of and commitment to the 'thought' (141), that is, the idea, of racial superiority (113).
- 26 *Ibid* at 144.
- 27 *Ibid* at 64.
- 28 When it comes to normative phenomena like racism, there is no such thing as 'pure action' (*ibid* at 67).
- 29 *Ibid* at 72-4.
- 30 *Ibid* at 68.
- 31 *Ibid* at 47.
- 32 *Ibid* at 46.
- 33 *Ibid* at 19, 32 and 104.
- 34 *Ibid* at 132.
- 35 *Ibid* at 142.
- 36 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (1968) 22.
- 37 Edwin Cameron, *Justice: A Personal Account* (2014) 218.
- 38 *Cf. supra* n 1 at 13.
- 39 *Ibid* at 206-7.
- 40 *Cf. ibid* at 161.