

Debating logic

Professor Leslie London ("Race remains a sound measure of social disadvantage", June 27) suggests that my arguments "seem illogical" to him. However, this perception arises because of his and not my logical failings.

First he attributes to me the mistaken inference that because "race" is an imperfect marker of disadvantage, it is no marker at all.

Here he implicitly attributes to me the inference that because not all "blacks" are disadvantaged, none are. That is clearly a preposterous inference and one wonders how he thinks I could be making it.

My argument is different. I do not deny that generalisations can be made. However, one has to be very careful how one employs generalisations when one seeks to act justly and intelligently.

First, one needs to be sensitive to contexts where generalisations are less likely to be true. For example, although it is true that most South Africans are Christians, one would be ill advised to apply that generalisation in determining the religious affiliation of those attending South African mosques and synagogues.

That is because we should expect deviations from the generalisation in those contexts. Similarly, whereas most South African "blacks" are educationally disadvantaged, we should not expect this generalisation to be true of those competing for academic positions.

Second, one needs to be sensitive to individual variations from the norm. The curious thing about London's logic is that it could have been used by racists opposed to the appointment of "blacks".

Consider the following scenario. As a result of racial discrimination, the overwhelming majority of "blacks" are educationally disadvantaged. Racists then note that being "black" is a very good marker for lacking the qualifications necessary for appointment to an academic position.

Thus they recommend a policy that favours the appointment of "whites".

A philosopher highlights the flaws of this line of reasoning, noting that fairness requires that we look at the individual rather than the generalisation.

At this point the racist, appropriating London's logic, accuses the philosopher of inferring from the claim that "race" is an imperfect proxy that it is no proxy at all.

The racist concludes that we may therefore use "race" after all. This is an absurd line of reasoning, but it is logically no different from London's.

London's second objection is that by my logic anybody with a good higher degree "can no longer be seen as disadvantaged".

This, he thinks, is at odds with his experience, according to which it is "obvious that many black appointees have overcome substantial disadvantage to achieve excellent academic records".

Here London misconstrues my argument by equivocating on the word "disadvantage". To say, as I do, that somebody with a good doctoral degree is no longer educationally disadvantaged, is not to say that that person never was educationally disadvantaged.

Thus the experiences London has had of "blacks" who have overcome substantial disadvantage is not a refutation of my claim.

London and I agree that there are first-rate "black" academics at the University of Cape Town who were or would have been appointed without a policy of racial preference.

Our disagreement concerns those who would not have been appointed without such a policy.

Of these candidates London cannot say, without omitting some of the truth, that they were "appointed on the basis of excellent records".

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