

How does anybody live in this strange place? A reply to Samantha Vice¹

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Abstract

Samantha Vice has argued that ‘white’ South Africans are so tainted by the history of racial oppression in their country that they are incapable of attaining a great degree of moral virtue. She recommends that they should live in humility and political silence. There are a number of flaws in her argument. First, none of the characteristics of ‘white’ South Africans that she says provides the basis for these conclusions can distinguish (almost) all ‘white’ South Africans from (almost) all ‘black’ South Africans. Second, because it is not only ‘white’ South Africans but everybody in the world who either perpetrates serious injustice or is tainted by others’ perpetration of it, her argument, if sound, would imply that nobody is capable of great virtue and that everybody ought to be politically silent. Finally, her recommendation that ‘white’ South Africans should be politically silent is a very dangerous one.

Keywords: Apartheid, complicity, political silence, privilege, Samantha Vice, ‘whiteness’.

Samantha Vice on ‘white’ South Africans

Samantha Vice, in her paper, “How do I live in this strange place?”, seeks ‘to critically reflect upon what it is to be white in a country like South Africa’ (Vice 2010: 323). More specifically, she asks how ‘white’ South Africans should live in the land, with its legacy of racial oppression. She argues that they should feel guilt, regret, but mainly shame for the wrongs committed against ‘black’ South Africans during the Apartheid period and beyond. She refers to *all* ‘white’ South Africans and not merely to those who endorsed or supported the racist government and policies.² Broadening her scope in this way does not lead her to minimize the extent to which she thinks that

1 I am grateful to members of my family and to Jeremy Wanderer for helpful comments. I should also like to acknowledge the comments I received during the process of anonymous review.

2 In some places she seems to step back from the strongest interpretation of this claim, granting possible exemption to younger South Africans, born or reared after 1994 (Vice 2010: 332, 341 n. 38). She also acknowledges that there ‘are justly famous exceptions’ (Vice 2010: 334), although precisely what characterizes these is left unstated. The question, though, is whether these exemptions from her critique are

'whites' in South Africa should see themselves as a problem. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that she thinks it is impossible 'for most well-intentioned white South Africans who grew up in the Apartheid years to fulfill their moral duties and attain a great degree of moral virtue' (Vice 2010: 334). She recommends that 'white' South Africans live with humility and in political silence (Vice 2010: 334-338).

How does Dr Vice³ reach these conclusions? The answer is not entirely clear because her argument is quite slippery. For example, she seems to slip between different descriptions of what the basic problem with 'white' South Africans is. She speaks of them, variably, as 'benefiting' from Apartheid (Vice 2010: 323), being 'privileged' (Vice 2010: 325), and being 'oppressors' (Vice 2010: 325). She also speaks of their 'ongoing wrongdoings and their visible effects' (Vice 2010: 337). These terms have different meanings and each claim has its problems. I shall consider each claim separately for the purposes of being analytically methodical. However, the separate and serial treatment is not intended to deny that there may be connections between the concepts. Indeed, the perceived connection between the concepts⁴ may well explain why Dr Vice has slipped between these different concepts.

'Benefited from Apartheid'

For people to be said (at least in a precise sense) to have benefited from Apartheid, it would have to be the case that they were made better off by Apartheid. However, this does not seem to be true of all 'white' South Africans, at least if we are speaking about being better off *all things considered*.⁵ Determining who benefited from Apartheid is obviously a complex matter that depends on what the alternative would have been. If the alternative would have been a liberal democratic society, then many 'whites' would have been no worse off in the counterfactual world in which Apartheid never existed.⁶ In such a society, 'blacks' would have enjoyed all the goods that 'whites' did

compatible with her critique itself. The purported problem that she identifies with being a 'white' South African (see below) seems to extend even to those categories of 'white' South Africans that she thinks might be exempt.

- 3 Although I am obviously aware of the academic convention of referring to people by surname only, it is a convention I eschew for reasons of courtesy. Thus my standard practice is to refer to people either by first name and surname or by title and surname. Adopting a more polite form of reference is especially important when one is disagreeing with somebody, as is so often the case in philosophical and other academic journals. It helps to preserve a tone of respect amidst the disagreement.
- 4 For example, it might be suggested that benefiting systematically constitutes or at least feeds into oppression. However, such connections cannot save Dr Vice's argument if each of the component concepts fails to do the necessary argumentative work. If all and only 'whites' cannot be tainted by the 'benefiting' argument, then one cannot taint all and only 'whites' by arguing that benefiting constitutes or feeds into oppression.
- 5 There is a difference between benefiting *in some way* and benefiting *all things considered*. Somebody can benefit in some ways from X, but that benefit could be outweighed by other harms resulting from X, and thus the person might not benefit all things considered. For example, a woman might derive the benefit of her husband's life insurance if he dies, but his death might harm her in ways that preclude our saying that she benefited all things considered from his death. (Things might be different if she killed him for his life insurance!) It is more likely that there are 'whites' who benefited *in some way* from Apartheid than that there are 'whites' who benefited *all things considered*. Yet, the *all things considered* benefit seems to be the (most) relevant form of benefit.
- 6 Some people might resist these counterfactual comparisons on the grounds that if Apartheid had not existed the *same* 'whites' would not have existed. I shall not evaluate this argument here. Notice, however, that if the counterfactual comparisons cannot be made, it would still be true, but for a different reason, that those 'whites' who exist today but who would not otherwise have existed are no better off than they would otherwise have been. (They are not better off than they would otherwise have been because they

(without 'whites' thereby being deprived of those goods). Put another way, many people mistakenly think that if somebody is harmed, somebody else must be benefited. Yet, it is entirely possible for some people to be harmed without anybody else thereby benefiting from the harm. The collapse of Apartheid has not made most 'whites' worse off than they previously were. Indeed, I would suggest that it has made most 'whites' better off, all things considered. Without suggesting in any way that 'whites' were anywhere nearly as badly off as 'blacks', it is quite clear that many 'whites' were nonetheless made worse off by Apartheid than they would have been if Apartheid had never existed. First, it does not seem to be a benefit to find oneself living in a society one finds deeply unjust.⁷ It can be very distressing to live in such a society, even if one is not oneself the victim of injustice. Moreover, 'whites' did not enjoy all the freedoms they now enjoy. For example, young 'white' males were conscripted. Certain books and films were banned. South Africa was ostracized internationally with negative consequences for 'whites' in South Africa. None of that is now true, which suggests that 'whites' are now in a better position than they previously were.

This is not to deny that some 'whites' benefited from Apartheid (in some ways, or even all things considered). Those who held political office, for example, would usually not have enjoyed those positions and power had there been universal adult suffrage.⁸ Some 'whites' got access to jobs that they would never have obtained if they were competing freely against 'black' compatriots. There were also people who benefited from the exploitation of poor 'black' workers who lacked legal protection. And there are clear ongoing effects of this. Thus, there obviously were 'whites' who benefited in some ways and some of these benefits might have produced a net benefit to them. However, it is a massive leap from these facts to the claim that all 'white' South Africans, or even all those who lived during the Apartheid era, were (all things considered) beneficiaries of Apartheid. There were undoubtedly millions of victims of Apartheid, but it does not follow that all 'whites' were beneficiaries of it.

Perhaps it will be suggested that there is a less technical and more colloquial sense in which 'whites' benefited from Apartheid. According to this interpretation Apartheid afforded 'whites' an unfair advantage over 'blacks' – an advantage that persists even in post-Apartheid South Africa.

In response to this suggestion, we should note, at the outset, that to 'benefit from' is different from having 'an unfair advantage over'. For example, in Apartheid South Africa, those people who were classified as 'coloured' or 'Indian', although discriminated against, were not in general as badly discriminated against as were 'blacks'. Thus 'coloureds' and 'Indians' had an unfair advantage over 'blacks', but that does not mean that they benefited from Apartheid.

However, even if one does insist on using 'benefit' in the sense of having an 'unfair advantage', it is not the case that all 'white' South Africans today have a residual unfair disadvantage over all 'black' South Africans. To say this, is not to deny the obvious fact that the vast majority of 'blacks' remain unfairly disadvantaged. Instead it is

would not otherwise have been.) It would also be true that today's 'blacks' who would not otherwise have existed were not harmed by Apartheid because they would not be worse off than they would otherwise have been. (This does not mean, of course, that those currently living 'blacks' who had themselves suffered discrimination are not worse off as a result of *that* discrimination.)

7 Clearly most 'whites' did not find Apartheid South Africa deeply unjust. However there were many who did.

8 A small number of 'blacks' also benefited in this way, by gaining positions of power in the 'independent black homelands'.

to note that a substantial minority of ‘blacks’ is not disadvantaged relative to ‘whites’. Indeed there are some ‘blacks’ – the mega-rich ones – who are (economically) advantaged over other ‘blacks’ (as well as over most ‘whites’). The wealth of many of them is the result of various redress measures introduced in response to the (demise of) Apartheid – measures of which they, but not other ‘blacks’ were well placed to make use. It is certainly not fair that these particular ‘blacks’ have been advantaged over the vast majority of ‘blacks’ who, despite the end of Apartheid, remain poor. Thus it seems that some ‘blacks’ have been afforded an unfair advantage over other ‘blacks’. If the problem with ‘whites’ is that they have been unfairly advantaged then the same problem characterizes those ‘blacks’ who have been unfairly advantaged.

‘Privileged’

Consider next what Dr Vice says about ‘whites’ being privileged. She is aware of some difficulties with the use of the word ‘privilege’. She observes that the word is often used to ‘refer to goods that one cannot expect as one’s due’ (Vice 2010: 325) and yet, she notes correctly, some of the ways in which ‘whites’ are privileged are the enjoyment of goods ‘that all people should be able to expect as their due’ (Vice 2010: 325). (For example, most ‘whites’ are privileged in having access to adequate nutrition, education, and health care, yet many people would say that everybody should be able to expect these as their due. Having them is not a cause for shame or guilt, even though one thinks that it is unfair that others do not also enjoy these benefits.)

Nor does it seem that Dr Vice could mean by ‘privilege’ simply that ‘whites’ are better off than ‘blacks’. It is true, of course, that most ‘whites’ are better off than most ‘blacks’, but there is a significant minority of ‘blacks’ that is also better off than most ‘blacks’. Indeed, a small minority of privileged ‘blacks’ is even better off than most ‘whites’. If privilege in this sense were the problem then some ‘blacks’ would be part of the problem, but Dr Vice does not appear to think this.

The relevant privilege seems to be what Dr Vice, following Paul Taylor and others, calls ‘whiteness’. This concept is not explicitly defined, but we are told that it ‘tends to involve a commitment to the centrality of white people and their perspectives: The way they [whites] see the world just is the way the world is, and the way they get around in the world just is the right way to get around’ (Vice 2010: 324, quoting Taylor 2004).

‘White’ privilege is also understood as unconscious habits (Vice 2010: 325, citing Sullivan 2001). It is ‘a global norm that is invisible’ (Vice 2010: 324, again quoting Taylor 2004). As a result, the privilege of ‘whites’ is invisible to themselves.

Before considering the various problems with these claims, it is worth noting that ‘whiteness’ is characterized in such a way that any ‘white’ attempting to deny it can simply be accused of being ‘whitely’. Any denial, or even any questioning of the existence or character of ‘whiteness’, can be met with the retort that it is the denier’s or questioner’s ‘whiteness’ that prevents him or her from seeing the ‘whiteness’. More specifically, providing an argument against the existence of ‘whiteness’ can be met with the charge that one is being ‘arrogant’ and ‘condescending’, and that one is assuming the superiority of one’s ‘whitely’ style of argument. I am not suggesting that anybody has (yet) offered this facile response. However, it is sadly true that a response’s being facile does not preclude its being offered, and thus it is worth anticipating and blocking. It would simply not be good enough to dismiss a critique by labeling the person offering the critique as ‘whitely’. Those claiming that ‘whiteness’ exists

must provide evidence for this and they must provide arguments to refute criticisms of the claim.

Dr Vice provides no evidence for the existence of 'whiteness'. This is a significant gap in her argument, given how crucial it is to establishing her conclusions. Although she refers to people who have offered some arguments for its existence, the arguments of the people she cites are both highly contested and contestable.⁹ It is thus regrettable that she seems simply to have assumed the existence of 'whiteness' rather than offering an argument demonstrating its existence.¹⁰

There are serious problems with the claims that are made about 'whiteness'. First, the suggestion that there is a 'white perspective' or that there are 'white' habits, seems like a stereotype. Are we really to believe that all (or even almost all) 'white' people share a perspective or a set of habits? There is as much diversity among 'whites' as there is among 'blacks'. Those claiming that there is a 'white' perspective need, as I have said, to demonstrate – rather than merely claim, or assume for the sake of argument – that it exists and what it is.

Second, while there are obviously dominant and non-dominant perspectives and norms, the identification, universally, of the 'white' perspective with the dominant perspective is mistaken. There is nothing dominant about the so-called 'white' perspective in Zimbabwe, for example. The same is true in any number of other African countries, as well as many countries throughout the Middle East and Asia. Even if it is thought that there is a certain western hegemony globally, many 'black' people in the west are part of that hegemony.

Are a 'white' perspective and habits dominant in South Africa? It is hard to answer this without knowing what the 'white' perspective and habits are, and Dr Vice does

9 I shall not evaluate their arguments in this paper, because it is Dr Vice's argument rather than theirs that is my focus here. However, it is worth noting that the examples they provide are spun a certain way, when they could as easily be spun another way. In other words, they involve massive inferential leaps from the raw evidence.

10 It has been suggested to me that there are two (purportedly) more charitable readings of her argument. According to the first of these readings, 'whiteness' is but an 'interpretative concept, which she presents as part of an attempt to make sense of the unique experience of being white in contemporary SA'. However, designating something as an 'interpretative concept' does not obviate the need for evidence. Interpretations can be incorrect. To interpret (some aspect of) the world one way rather than another one must have evidence for interpreting it that way. Nor is it correct to say, as has been suggested to me, that philosophical arguments employing interpretative concepts need not be supported by evidence. When philosophers make claims about the way the world is they are under as much of an obligation as anybody else to show that their claims are true, or at least to reference empirical support for their claims. The failure to do so opens philosophy to a criticism to which it all too often succumbs – that it is detached from reality. Thus it is not clear to me why understanding 'whiteness' as an interpretative concept constitutes a more charitable reading. According to the second alternative reading, her project is to ask how 'whites' should respond if we assume, for the sake of argument, the existence of 'whiteness'. If that is indeed Dr Vice's project, then it is much less demanding of our attention. It is much less interesting and compelling to assume some highly controversial claim and then to provide an argument about how we should respond to that claim if it were true, than it is to first argue for the truth of the claim and then to provide an argument about how we should respond to it. For those who doubt that the claim of 'whiteness' is highly controversial, I shall shortly point to a number of considerations that demonstrate that it is. However, even if we should read Dr Vice's project in the more charitable way suggested, I argue in the latter part of the paper (in the section entitled 'A dangerous recommendation'), that Dr Vice's recommendation of political silence ought not to be followed. That argument holds even if we assume the existence of 'whiteness'.

not enlighten us in this regard. However, we can conjecture and consider some possible components of the purported 'whiteness'.

English is the dominant language in South Africa and that clearly disadvantages those native speakers of other South African languages who are not proficient in English, but the latter include both 'blacks' and 'whites'. And there are, of course, many 'blacks' whose home language is English or who are entirely fluent in it.

Christianity, a 'white' import to South Africa, is the dominant religion, but millions of South African 'blacks' are Christian, and a minority of 'whites' are not. The prevailing religious assumptions are thus not alien to most 'blacks' and are alien to some 'whites'.

European styles of clothing are dominant, but this is at least in part because 'blacks' have adopted these norms of attire as their own. When there is an assertion of African identity by adopting more recognizably African dress, this stops short, at least in urban areas, of female bare-breastedness, for example.¹¹ This is not because of a fear of 'white' disapproval, but because European standards of bodily modesty have been internalized, at least to some extent.

Polygamy, not part of contemporary South African 'white' society, but common among *some* 'blacks' in South Africa, is legally recognized, even though monogamy is the more common form of marriage arrangement in the country.

Traditional healers practice their medicine. They do not enjoy equality with university-trained doctors, but their lower status is not a mere 'whitely' assumption. Many 'blacks' accept 'western' medicine and some 'whites' – those who are Christian Scientists, for example – do not.

More generally, the country is a constitutional democracy with a bill of rights – a western import, but one that has been championed by many 'blacks' and was previously opposed by many 'whites'.

In short, it is clear that European ideas, as well as 'white' immigrants to South Africa, and their descendents, have had a significant effect on the prevailing norms of the country, but it is hardly clear that these norms are a manifestation of ongoing 'whiteness', in part because they are now also the norms of many 'blacks' – and not the norms of some 'whites'. Perhaps Dr Vice has specific other norms in mind when she speaks about South African 'whiteness', but because she does not say what those are, it is very difficult to assess all the possibilities she might have in mind.

None of this is to deny that there are dominant views in South Africa, or anywhere else. However, Dr Vice has not shown us that the dominant views – or even the invisibly dominant views – are the views of 'whites'. Indeed, I think that the truth is vastly more complicated than is suggested by her claim that 'whites' enjoy 'that ease of moving about the world that comes with being white' (Vice 2010: 329).

Many westerners will find the norms of attire in Islamic countries to be restrictive, and it is not easy for religiously conservative Muslims to encounter the public displays of flesh in western and many African countries. Likewise, the shy and self-effacing will be challenged by societies in which brash self-promotion is the norm. People with high standards of hygiene will have difficulty when they encounter what they, but not most people, take to be filthy practices and environments. Skeptics will find the credulity of the masses a constant source of irritation. Vegetarians and vegans will have a difficult time navigating the omnivorous assumptions of restaurants – and the world at

¹¹ Beaches are an exception, but not only for 'blacks'. Indeed, the beach exception is not uncommon in some parts of Europe.

large. In sum, the more unusual one is – the more one’s views and habits depart from common assumptions (in a given place) – the harder it will be, all other things being equal, to move about (that part of) the world.

But it is not only being unusual that makes the world a difficult place to navigate. Poverty, disability, infirmity, illness and vulnerability all contribute, and there are millions of people suffering these. There are many more ‘black’ than ‘white’ people languishing under conditions of poverty in South Africa, but there are also a growing number of ‘blacks’ who do not face this particular difficulty and there are ‘whites’ who face this difficulty and others.

‘Oppressors’

Dr Vice makes repeated reference to oppression. Her precise claim is not clear. Sometimes it seems as though she is saying that ‘whites’ oppressed (and continue to oppress) ‘blacks’,¹² but sometimes she seems to be suggesting that (almost) all ‘whites’ are complicit in the (ongoing) oppression of ‘blacks’. Neither of these claims provides a basis for singling out (almost) all ‘whites’.¹³

‘Blacks’ were oppressed during Apartheid, and they were oppressed by ‘whites’. It does not follow from this, however, that all (or even almost all) ‘whites’ were oppressors. There were ‘whites’ who abhorred Apartheid, who worked and voted against it, and who treated people, whatever their ‘race’, with decency. They were a minority but by no means an insignificant minority.¹⁴ They were not and are not oppressors, at least in the way the word ‘oppressor’ is usually understood. Thus, if one is going to persist in claiming that all ‘whites’ were – and still are – oppressors, one is going to have to make considerable changes to the meaning of the word ‘oppressor’.¹⁵ It might be because the meaning of ‘oppressor’ would then become inappropriately diluted, that Dr Vice never explicitly reinterprets the word. Alternatively, perhaps it is the case that notwithstanding its deviation from the ordinary meaning, the redefinition has become such an orthodoxy in academic circles that it was felt that there was no need to explicate it, let alone defend it. Either way Dr Vice has not borne her argumentational burden.

Perhaps, however, Dr Vice means that ‘white’ South Africans, although not all oppressors, are complicit in oppression of ‘blacks’. What could be the basis for thinking this of (almost) all ‘whites’ in South Africa? Dr Vice seems to say that the complicity

12 For example, in speaking about oppression, she mentions the ‘moral offenses’ of ‘white’ South Africans (Vice 2010: 326).

13 It has been suggested to me that Dr Vice does not make the claim about all ‘whites’ – that she allows for exceptions. However, see my note 2 above.

14 It has been suggested that I should ‘specify (perhaps in terms of party politics) who this minority were, and how large a proportion of the white population they constituted’. I have specified the relevant attributes of the people to whom I am referring. It would be over-simplistic to suggest that this category is co-extensive with any particular political parties. It should be clear that it does *not* include those who supported pro-Apartheid political parties, but it would be incorrect to say that all those who supported anti-Apartheid parties fit the category I have described. Some (but not all) of those South Africans who voted for the Progressive Federal Party, for example, had racist attitudes and engaged in racist practices even while opposing Apartheid. Because we do not have the requisite detailed information about each ‘white’ South African during the relevant period, it is not possible to say what proportion of the population ‘abhorred Apartheid, worked and voted against it, and treated people, whatever their “race”, with decency’. There were many such people, even if we cannot say how many.

15 Iris Marion Young is one who attempts to redefine ‘oppression’ (See Young 1990). I discuss this in *The Second Sexism* (Benatar 2012: 248-52).

stems from ‘habitual white privilege’.¹⁶ However, if we accept this interpretation of her talk about oppression, then this objection collapses into the claim that (almost) all ‘white’ South Africans are ‘whitely’, and I have already argued that that claim is flawed.

Perhaps it will be suggested that the way in which ‘white’ South Africans are complicit in the oppression of ‘blacks’ is by having benefited economically from Apartheid. However, if that is how ‘oppression’ is interpreted, then the objection collapses into the claim that (almost) all ‘white’ South Africans benefited from Apartheid. In my earlier discussion of this claim I argued that it fails to differentiate (almost) all ‘white’ South Africans from their ‘black’ fellow citizens. If economic privilege is the reason why ‘white’ South Africans are a problem, then poor ‘whites’ are not part of the problem that Dr Vice describes, and rich ‘blacks’ are.

‘Wrongdoings’

The final way Dr Vice describes what the problem with ‘white’ South Africans is, is by referring to their ‘ongoing wrongdoings and their visible effects’ (Vice 2010: 337). It is not clear whether these wrongdoings are identical with the oppression of which all ‘whites’ are allegedly guilty. In one place she suggests that the scope of the wrongdoings is much broader than that. In responding to those who are dismissive of the ‘white guilt’ that pervades her paper, she says that there ‘are many ways of being unjust’ (Vice 2010: 327) and that even if we set ‘aside blatant discrimination and cruelty, there are still obvious vices like indifference or callousness, cowardice or dishonesty, the failure of imagination and empathy, or just plain laziness’ (Vice 2010: 327).

I certainly agree with that, but the question arises whether this is a basis for describing ‘whites’ as a special problem. It is to this question that I now turn.

Saliency

The earth is a terrible place, permeated by injustice and other wrongdoing. Millions of people are oppressed by their governments. Millions are discriminated against on the basis of their sex, their race, their ethnicity, their religion or their sexual orientation. Millions of children are maltreated by their parents, their teachers, or their peers. Innocent people are convicted and sentenced to harsh punishments, while guilty people go free. Many tyrants prosper while decent people opposing them are crushed. The poor languish, the weak are exploited, and the disabled are excluded. Billions of animals are reared in the most appalling conditions and then slaughtered to satisfy the human taste for flesh (and for other animal products).

Injustice is pervasive. It comes in degrees, of course, but there are vast amounts of severe injustice. Apartheid was one example. It was worse than many other injustices but not as bad as some others. That injustice comes in degrees does not mean that we should concern ourselves only with the worst of them. Any injustice – and certainly any serious injustice, as Apartheid surely was – deserves attention. However, in assigning moral guilt, there is something problematic in assigning it selectively.

Dr Vice nods in the direction of this point. She says, first, that the problem of ‘whiteness’ exists not only in South Africa but also in other (or all) parts of the world (Vice 2010: 324, 326-7, 331-2), but that her focus is, for various reasons, on South Africa. Second, she suggests that comparable points could be made about class and gen-

¹⁶ For example, she says: ‘In this paper, I will focus on the moral damage done to the oppressors’ character by habitual white privilege’ (Vice 2010: 325). The context suggests that she thinks all those with ‘habitual white privilege’ are, at the very least, complicit in oppression.

der. She adds that '[o]ne day it will be plausible to add species to this list too' (Vice 2010: 340, n. 5). However, the significance of this observation, which is relegated to an endnote, is much greater than Dr Vice recognizes.

Consider, for example, a 'white' South African who found Apartheid deeply objectionable, consistently voted for liberal opposition parties, treated all people with dignity and acted compassionately towards those who were ill treated. It is hard to say of such people – and there were many – that they were indifferent or callous, or that they lacked imagination. Let us assume, for the moment, that they can be accused of cowardice or laziness in not doing more to oppose Apartheid, even if that would have endangered themselves. How guilty are such people in comparison with those 'black' South Africans who actively participated in 'necklace' killings, who committed acts of terror against innocents, or who actively collaborated with the Apartheid regime? Surely those committing grave injustices of these kinds are much more morally culpable than those who simply failed to stop the injustices perpetrated and supported by others. Of course, it was a minority of 'blacks' who were guilty of such injustices, but there were many more who stood by and did nothing when they were being perpetrated. Are they not also culpable of cowardice or laziness? And what about the complicity of those members of the extra-parliamentary 'liberation movements' that were in league with the Soviet Union and therefore also its many evils?¹⁷

Perhaps it will be suggested that there is an asymmetry between the wrongs committed by 'blacks' under Apartheid and those committed by 'whites' – that we need to be more understanding of the oppressed than we are of the oppressor. That will not rescue Dr Vice's position. Consider what post-Apartheid South Africans, and especially those who support the African National Congress (ANC) government are, following Dr Vice's standards, complicit in: Propping up of a murderous, corrupt, tyrannical regime in Zimbabwe, support in the United Nations of various rogue states, and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of South Africans on account of the government's erstwhile AIDS-denialism.

Moreover, billions of people – 'blacks' and 'whites', South Africans and others – consume the flesh of animals that have been reared and slaughtered in horrendous conditions. To suggest that the 'white' liberal is so tainted by Apartheid that a virtuous life is impossible, but to ignore the viciousness of the ('black' and 'white') meat-eaters is deeply problematic. Whereas the former are, in many cases, responsible only for not doing more to stop the injustice of Apartheid, the latter are up to their teeth in the perpetration of injustice. Thus if all 'whites' are a problem and are not capable of living a virtuous life, then the same must be said of all flesh-eaters.¹⁸ The point could be repeated for those guilty of endless other injustices and wrongdoing – spouse-beaters, child-abusers, sexual and other assailants, exploiters of the poor, reckless drivers, corrupt public officials, those who enforce deeply unjust laws, and so forth.

Using Dr Vice's standards, who remains untainted by all injustice? Nobody – or almost nobody!

17 They were also in league with the likes of Muammar Gaddafi and Yasser Arafat, repressive, corrupt human-rights violators and agents of terror.

18 This assumes, of course, that the way humans treat animals is wrong. I shall not argue for that conclusion here. It is a sign of the pervasive moral insensitivity to animals that so few people can even see that the current treatment of animals is depraved. One might term this 'humanliness' (as an analogue for 'whiteness').

If that is the case, then it is profoundly misleading to focus only on (South African) ‘whites’ as though there were something exceptional about all of them. In saying this, I do not intend to minimize the injustices of Apartheid, but instead to highlight the many other comparable and worse injustices that slip under the radar and yet are entirely relevant. This point bears emphasis because many who are sympathetic to Dr Vice’s arguments are prone to misunderstand my criticism. My objection is not that because there is lots of injustice in the world, one is never justified in focusing on a particular injustice. Nor am I suggesting that the pervasiveness of injustice should make us blasé about any of it. Instead I am saying that one important way of assessing an argument is to examine its logical implications. Thus, if complicity in serious injustice, even indirectly, precludes the possibility of virtue and necessitates political silence, then the argument implies not merely that South African ‘whites’ are incapable of virtue and should be politically silent, but that everybody or almost everybody is incapable of virtue and should be politically silent. Either that conclusion is absurd in which case we have a *reductio* of the claims that entail it, or the conclusion must be embraced.

If Dr Vice thinks that her arguments do apply to everybody, or almost everybody, and not just ‘whites’, it would be helpful to know that her actual conclusion is that (almost) everybody, for some or other reason, is incapable of leading a virtuous life. (Does it also follow that almost everybody should also be politically silent? How could it be the case that everybody should be politically silent?) And if she does not think that (almost) everybody gets caught in the net of her argument, it would be good to hear why she thinks that the purported wrongs of being ‘white’ stand out.¹⁹ She would have a massive argumentative burden to bear if she were to make this claim. For example, group responsibility is more controversial than individual responsibility, especially when the group is one such as a ‘race’, religion, ethnic group, or a sex. Obligations to protest and prevent injustice, especially at great personal cost, are also more controversial than obligations not to perpetrate injustice oneself, especially when the latter can be done without great cost to oneself.²⁰

19 She does say a bit about why she thinks that the situation of *South African* ‘whites’ is distinctive relative to ‘whites’ elsewhere. I do not have the space to evaluate these arguments in detail, but a few examples, and why they fail can be provided. She says that ‘the injustice and inhumanity of Apartheid is part of the experience and memory of most adults’ (Vice 2010: 332) and that ‘in South Africa, the working and effects of privilege are starkly apparent’ (Vice 2010: 326). The same, of course, is true of many other serious injustices, including the appalling treatment of animals – which is ongoing and not merely within living memory. Another justification she provides is that in South Africa, ‘whites are a very small minority and one’s moral instincts recoil from the fact that wealth and privilege are distributed in so drastically skewed a way’ (Vice 2010: 331). Intra-nationally that may be true, but at a global level, wealth and privilege are distributed at least as unequally, with those at the top are disproportionately ‘white’. And insofar as ‘whites’ are a minority *within* South Africa, their norms seem to be less not more dominant. ‘Whites’ in South Africa are arguably less not more ‘whitely’ than ‘whites’ in the United States, precisely because ‘whites’ in South Africa are repeatedly ‘reminded’ that they and their views are a minority.

20 What duties we have to oppose injustice is a very difficult question to answer and I shall not attempt to answer it here. However, I am inclined to be less judgmental of those who, doing what they can to avoid performing evil themselves, do not spend all their lives also trying to stop others. Those who disagree with me, need to recognize just how extensive the implication of this is. It applies not only to ‘whites’ in South Africa, but to everybody everywhere.

It is entirely reasonable to ask ‘How do I live in this strange place?’ But the strange place is not merely South Africa. It is the earth. And the ‘I’ is universal. It is every person. How do any of us live in such a sick world?

I do not plan to answer that question here. Instead, I want to comment on Dr Vice’s answer to her own question. Part of it, I shall suggest, has merit. The other part is not only wrong, but also dangerous.

A dangerous recommendation

Dr Vice has two recommendations to ‘white’ South Africans. The first is humility. Because I take humility to be a virtue, I have no objection here, other than to note, as Dr Vice does, that it is a requirement in any situation – and not only in the situation in which ‘white’ South Africans find themselves (Vice 2010: 335). I do not think that ‘white’ South Africans ought to have any more (or any less) humility than anybody else. All people have good grounds for humility.

Her second recommendation is that South African ‘whites’ practice a certain kind of silence – political silence (Vice 2010: 337).²¹ Dr Vice is (appropriately) less sure of this recommendation. She says that she is ‘not at all clear on whether silence can be adequately defended as the correct policy’ (Vice 2010: 335). Her central defence of the recommendation is that such silence would be an expression of humility and ‘would prevent one’s whitely perspective from causing further distortion in the political and public contexts’ (Vice 2010: 337).

Dr Vice does not explain what she means by political silence. In one way, the most charitable explanation for this is that no further explanation is required because she is referring to silence in the political sphere fairly broadly conceived. If, however, she means particular kinds of political silence, then it is a serious shortcoming of her argument that she does not say what these are. If one is attempting to make a recommendation and one fails to make clear what that recommendation is, one has not really made the recommendation.

The recommendation that ‘whites’ remain politically silent is a very dangerous recommendation, irrespective of whether Dr Vice is referring to political silence broadly construed or to some more specific forms of political silence. A healthy liberal democracy depends on political opposition to the dominant political views and to the excesses and deficiencies to which any government is prone. South Africa is no exception. The ANC government has been guilty of much (and thus also has much cause for humility)²²: abuse of power, corruption, inadequately protecting citizens and foreigners from violent criminals, service delivery failures, inflammatory rhetoric, and uncon-

21 Dr Vice does not claim that humility and political silence are the only morally appropriate responses. In particular, she mentions the possibility of becoming ‘politically or socially active’ (Vice 2010: 334), but what she has in mind here is a restricted range of political activity. More specifically, she has in mind ‘joining or working for a relevant organization to make reparations for the harm one’s whiteness expresses and maintains’ (Vice 2010: 334). She certainly does not seem to have in mind the political opposition to which I shall soon refer. Moreover, while she allows the option of reparative political activity, she thinks that although this ‘seems to be the best response to guilt ... it does not fully take on board the logic of shame’ (Vice 2010: 334), which requires political silence.

22 Indeed, one of the dangers of Dr Vice’s recommendation is that it is likely to encourage the opposite of humility – arrogance – in the government. It is already the case that the ANC and other former extra-parliamentary liberation groups believe that they occupy the moral high ground, even relative to the ‘white’ liberal opponents of Apartheid. They would have us believe, for example, that ‘black’ communists working for their *own* rights, were morally superior to ‘white’ liberals working for the rights of *others*.

scionable support of tyrannical regimes in other countries. The major opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), is one in which many 'whites' are involved and that draws the bulk of the 'white' vote. While it also enjoys the involvement and attracts the votes of many other South Africans,²³ it would be considerably weaker if 'whites' adopted the silence Dr Vice recommends. The same is true of many political non-governmental organizations and other components of civil society that impact on political and public life. The suggestion that South African 'whites' should remain politically silent, if acted upon, would thus have a bad outcome. We do not know how bad it would be. One possibility is that it would lead to the 'Zimbabwefication' of South Africa, an outcome that would be catastrophic both for 'black' and for 'white' South Africans.²⁴ However, even if South Africa would not become that bad, it would be worse than it would otherwise be if there were not a significant political opposition.

It might be replied that this is to over-estimate the influence that 'whites' can have, and is thus a 'whitely' assumption. However, if that were the case, then it would be hard to understand how Dr Vice could think that 'white' silence is necessary in order to prevent a distortion in political and public contexts. How could 'whites' have sufficient influence to cause a distortion? If I am overestimating 'white' influence, then so is Dr Vice. I do not think that the reverse is true. 'Whites' are a small minority in South Africa. While they can have some political influence there is a limit to this influence. However extensive it may be, however, it is a positive one if it is a check on the hegemony of one political party.

I do not think that 'white' political participation 'assumes one matters politically and morally beyond the ways in which everyone matters equally' (Vice 2010: 335). Indeed, the suggestion that 'whites' should be politically silent would amount, I think, to 'whites' mattering less, politically and morally. Everybody else would be morally entitled to speak, but 'whites' would not.

Conclusion

The world is a complicated place. There is – or should be – plenty of guilt, shame and regret. However, the extent to which these are appropriate varies from individual to individual. To judge people, their moral culpability and their moral prospects on the basis of their being part of a racial, religious, ethnic, national or some other such group, is to oversimplify and to resort to stereotypes.

The complexity of the world also means that none of us can completely disentangle ourselves from injustice and wrongdoing committed by others. To the morally sensitive, this is a source of pain, and they would much rather be able to distance themselves entirely from these evils. That nobody is able to do so, however, does not mean that everybody is as tainted as those who perpetrate evil. There are also many evils and it is a sad truth that those who are victims of some injustices are often also the perpetrators of other gross injustices. This only heightens the need for nuance in the apportionment of blame.

Samantha Vice has remarked that hers was 'a very difficult paper to write' (Vice 2010: 340). I can see why that was so. However, one benefit of her position is that even those who disagree with her may nonetheless see her as well-meaning and may

²³ Contrary to the (racist) political rhetoric of the ANC.

²⁴ It is possible, of course, that South Africa will go the way of Zimbabwe even with 'white' outspokenness. My claim is only that the chances of becoming a banana republic are increased if 'whites' remained politically silent.

admire her manifest soul-searching. By contrast, those offering arguments such as mine, are more likely to be seen by those who disagree with us as being insensitive or self-serving, if not worse. In that sense writing a paper critical of Dr Vice's views is not easy. It is also not easy to disagree as emphatically as I do with somebody one holds in high regard. The one comfort is that in arguing that Dr Vice is wrong, I am allowing that she may be more capable of virtue than she thinks.

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