

Affirmative action

Laurie Nathan (April 18) accuses my critique of affirmative action of "lightness", because, he says, it "comprised nothing but personal opinions" and was not based on any data. In laying this charge, Dr Nathan makes at least two very basic mistakes.

First, he fails to distinguish between empirical questions on the one hand, and conceptual and logical issues on the other. Discussions of affirmative action are characterised by confusion. The philosopher's task is to clarify matters and to apply rigorous logical standards to such discussions. That these interventions are not empirical does not mean that they are mere "personal opinions", even though they are deeply threatening to those who prefer the fog.

Empirical data, of course, is relevant to answering practical moral questions. Had Dr Nathan heard my inaugural lecture, he would have heard me refer to some empirical evidence, where it was relevant, and he would have heard me highlight where there were gaps in the empirical data that social scientists might seek to fill - evidence that defenders of affirmative action also lack.

Dr Nathan's second mistake is to think that all empirical questions require formal study.

For example, he criticises my claim that the people most disadvantaged by injustice are those least likely to benefit from affirmative action.

He asks whether this is mere thumb-sucking.

Does Dr Nathan really think that we require a phalanx of clipboard-bearing social scientists to establish that those who cannot read or write among the most unjustly disadvantaged are unlikely to benefit from affirmative action policies that admit students to universities or university graduates to professional positions?

David Benatar
University of Cape Town

Published on the web by Cape Times on April 19, 2007.

© Cape Times 2007. All rights reserved.