

Dialogue Alone: D. C. S. Oosthuizen's Engagement with Three Philosophical Generations

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I Introduction

The legacy of D. C. S. Oosthuizen is best approached by viewing his work as an ongoing engagement with the philosophical ideas and assumptions of his time. In this discussion, I will try to interpret his work from something of a bird's eye view as engaging in dialogue with three philosophical generations: the Afrikaner intellectuals of his own generation; the liberal and broadly secular culture of English-language South African universities in the 1960s; and the new radicalism emerging after Sharpeville, initially in such contexts as the University Christian Movement, that was to become prominent in the 1980s, a decade after Oosthuizen's death.

I do not mean by this to suggest that these three generational engagements represent three different periods of Oosthuizen's life. In various ways they overlap with and inform each other. But I believe that understanding their continuity is essential to grasping the integrity of Oosthuizen's work. That integrity – the sense of his being 'made out of one piece', in the Afrikaans usage, rather than presenting different personae to the world according to what circumstances required – made a lasting impression on those who knew him.

I would surmise that it is also part of the reason why Oosthuizen's name is linked to the celebration of academic freedom at Rhodes University. For academic freedom is not just a legal right that a university enjoys in a formal and passive sense, but a commitment to constantly exploring the vital questions of the day in an honest and forthright way, without being swayed by considerations of power or fashion.

In classical Greece, the terms referring to free speech did not imply that one could speak without fear of the consequences. They implied instead that you lived in a community whose way of life promoted the civic virtues that would enable you to take on the risks of speaking freely when circumstances demanded that of you. It implied that you would be true to yourself rather than saying what others wished to hear.

The contemporary conception of rights as a kind of protection is often used to disguise relations of domination. Celebrating academic freedom on this model – that is, on the model of the right of a homeless person to buy a mansion,

or start a business, if only they can raise the money, or constitutional rights that can be defended by those who can afford the lawyer's bills – can become a way of ensuring that the freedom you celebrate is never actually put to use.

II Oosthuizen in Stellenbosch

Oosthuizen's engagement with Afrikaner intellectual life at Stellenbosch in the 1940s began his philosophical career and left its mark on all his subsequent work. Of the three overlapping generations I spoke of earlier, the Afrikaner intellectual group of his own generation is the only one we can speak of his engagement as a relatively completed project, not in the sense that he would have had nothing more to say if he had lived longer, but in the sense that we can see a clear trajectory to his development in this context.

Oosthuizen came to Stellenbosch in 1943. He became perhaps the central figure in a remarkably gifted and innovative group of young philosophers who, by 1947, if not earlier, were exploring new lines of argument and analysis that were unfamiliar to their teachers and were to leave their mark for decades to come both in Stellenbosch and in the broader field of South African intellectual life.

The most innovative among them were Oosthuizen himself, James Oglethorpe, who arrived at Stellenbosch in 1942, completed an M.A. in philosophy and a degree in theology, and later became a DRC missionary in Zambia, and Johan Degenaar, who began his studies in 1944, was later to abandon theology, was appointed as a lecturer in philosophy in 1948, and was a legendary teacher there until his retirement in 1991.

Although these three were most prominent, there can be no doubt, if one reads the graduate theses and student newspapers of the time, that the ideas that seized hold of them provided a vocabulary for a far wider group – a vocabulary drawn largely, though by no means wholly, from the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard.

It is highly unusual – in any historical context, but certainly in South African intellectual history – to find a group of students pioneering new trends in this way. This became possible in Stellenbosch of the mid-1940s only because philosophy had come to occupy such a crucial role in its larger political and intellectual culture, and the stakes for philosophical argument had become so high. If not literally a matter of life and death, then at least a matter of heresy and orthodoxy, of being true to the past or the future, keeping ties of solidarity with the Afrikaner community or taking on demands that were seen as essential to progress and development.

Stellenbosch was the main educational centre for the Dutch- and later Afrikaans-speaking population of the Western Cape. In the aftermath of the South African War, it had a pivotal role both in the Afrikaans language movement and in the development of Afrikaner nationalism. But the social and

economic position of Afrikaners in the Western Cape remained very different from that of the rest of the country.

This was the one part of South Africa in which Afrikaners had a clear and long-established stake in capitalism. The wheat and wine farmers of the Western Cape formed the oldest stratum of the ruling class; a powerful and affluent elite that had been the major beneficiaries of Willem Adriaan van der Stel's fall from grace as governor in 1707. This was also the region in which Afrikaner institutions, the church, district banks, newspapers and publications, were most firmly entrenched.

In no other region of the country was Afrikaner political and intellectual life faced with the same sharp dilemma between embracing modernisation, which was essential to the interests of the capitalist social basis of its institutions, and opposing it in order to secure their political alliances with Afrikaners in the northern provinces, seeking to mobilise newly-urbanised workers and an embattled petty bourgeoisie against a hostile and alien mining industry. In this context, a distinctive philosophical tradition emerged at Stellenbosch that could neither fully embrace modernity nor resist it in the name of a pre-modern ideal.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, academic philosophy in South Africa was largely a colonial variant of British Hegelianism, sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly at the same time intended as a justification of the historical design of British imperialism. By the time Oosthuizen began his studies in the 1940s, philosophy at the other Afrikaans universities had orientated itself toward a neo-Calvinist cosmology. At the English-language universities, philosophy was often oriented toward science, adopting the positivist temper of the early philosophy of language, often becoming increasingly technical and removed from the topical issues of the day. Stellenbosch remained in a category of its own, developing a philosophical modernism in a largely ethical register, often critical of the claims of science.

A special burden was placed on the discipline of philosophy at Stellenbosch by the protracted heresy trial of Professor Johannes du Plessis of the theological seminary. Proceedings in the Presbytery of Stellenbosch, then in the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, and finally in the Supreme Court, continued from 1928 until his eventual dismissal from the seminary, though not from the university, in 1932. There was considerable support for du Plessis at Stellenbosch. In the aftermath of his dismissal, the numbers of theology students declined dramatically and the study of philosophy thrived.

By the early 1940s, almost a quarter of graduate students at Stellenbosch were in the Department of Philosophy. Oosthuizen and his contemporaries came into a discipline that seemed to be opening up ever broader new horizons, but found that larger developments within Afrikaner politics were in the process of narrowing them down. His teacher, J. F. Kirsten, responded to this dilemma with a kind of dualism: on the one hand, recognising that our

knowledge of the world is in constant flux; on the other hand, asserting that eternal values anchor us in the midst of it; and then blurring the line between them.

Oosthuizen and his contemporaries effectively exploded this attempt to reconcile the norms of science and religion, arguing instead that all religious and ethical values required a leap of faith, an individual commitment that always had to be actively renewed. Rather than smoothing over the crisis of the philosopher under pressure to conform to a national movement, Oosthuizen argued that every moment of life was a moment of crisis and decision. Conformity with a dogmatic system of values was no more than an evasion of ethical and intellectual responsibility.

This Stellenbosch existentialism drew centrally on the work of Kierkegaard. This writer's work was written in Danish in the 1830s and 1840s. It was translated into German in the first decades of the twentieth century and fragments of it made their way into theological discussion in South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. Translation of his writings into English began in 1935. By 1947, Kierkegaard's work was at the centre of graduate research at Stellenbosch and it remained so for years to come. Oosthuizen was probably the first of this generation to seize upon Kierkegaard and certainly the one who used the philosophical framework he provided with most creativity and intensity.

Oosthuizen's M.A. thesis, completed in 1949, is an extraordinary work. Entitled *Die Verklaringsdrang* (roughly, *The Urge to Explain*, although *verklaar* suggest something more comprehensive than the English word, *explain*) and subtitled *Aesthetic-comical and fragmentary considerations concerning the philosophy of explanation in the direction of an existential dialectic*, its main text was no longer than 39 pages, followed by 82 pages of endnotes. The text contains no direct reference to any philosopher, other than brief discussion of Kant, although the notes refer to an extensive range of authors. But the argument is Oosthuizen's own.

Briefly, he argues that the urge to explain, which makes possible the dialectical reasoning – that is, reasoning that follows the movement of contradictions, rather than reasoning axiomatically from consistent statements – that is needed in order to provide a universal and necessary explanation of reality, requires a certain attitude. This he describes as the 'will to freedom'. However, this will to freedom proves to be self-undermining. To establish an unconditional beginning for all reasoning, it must negate all premises drawn from conventional wisdom. In willing freedom, according to Oosthuizen, the subject is deprived of all existing ties, and has no choice but to cast himself before God, where his true self is realised.

It is a pessimistic, even despairing, conclusion, and Oosthuizen is the first to point this out. A study of this kind is comical, he says, revealing that the author 'stands in an aesthetic relationship to matters that he should take seriously' – that is, ethically. Of course, he took them very seriously indeed.

Something of the same pessimism stands out in the student journalism of Oosthuizen and his contemporaries. Oosthuizen and Oglethorpe wrote prolifically for popular publication. Both of them were editors of *Die Stellenbosse Student* in the years immediately after the National Party election victory of 1948. Oglethorpe attacked apartheid directly, in a similarly existentialist register, arguing that by supporting apartheid for the sake of 'the right of the nation to survive' the DRC had abandoned 'its most precious possession, its faith'. Oosthuizen was more guarded, arguing, for example, that all sides to the controversy over university apartheid were equally determined to establish a new conformity and were fearful of real individuality.

The result of this generation's work was to present young Afrikaner intellectuals with a choice where none had existed before – that is, where the terms had not been developed in which to articulate that choice. It was not a choice between supporting or opposing the existing social and political order, but rather a choice between loyalty to that order or loyalty to the self in whose name that order had been established. It was, let us say, a modest kind of opposition to apartheid. But it placed an explosive charge beneath the façade of apartheid rule. It provided the impetus for Oosthuizen's continued enquiries into the ethics of apartheid and resistance to apartheid.

III After Stellenbosch – Oosthuizen's Trajectory

Oosthuizen never abandoned the themes that he had acquired from his work on Kierkegaard, but he pursued them in a very different philosophical idiom. I discussed his earlier work in its local context in Stellenbosch. To understand the choices that led to his shift to analytical philosophy in his later work, it is necessary to consider the larger context of Western philosophy in the twentieth century.

Oosthuizen's career, once his student days were over, was defined by adherence to not one, but both, of the major currents of twentieth-century philosophy: the school of phenomenology pioneered by Edmund Husserl, and analytical philosophy, with which the names of G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein are most often associated. These are the two currents that most clearly express the distinctively twentieth-century philosophical project of overcoming metaphysics – that is, leaving the attempt to discover a true structure of reality to the natural sciences – while seeking to keep alive questions of truth, meaning, and value. By the time Oosthuizen began his studies in the Netherlands, this project was coming clearly into view.

Husserl's phenomenology undertook to found knowledge on a study of the basic processes of consciousness that made it possible, reducing the study of consciousness to the question of how phenomena appear to it. That is, instead of seeking to grasp a larger purpose of the human mind, or a great idea under which its contents could be organised, it developed the procedures that would make it possible to say 'this is red' of a red object – to capture its redness, as

opposed to other qualities of the same object. It sought to integrate the findings of science into philosophy and also, in Husserl's later work, to criticise the philosophical orientation of the sciences.

Analytical philosophy began similarly with a critique of metaphysics and idealism in general. Rather than showing on the basis of logic that, for example, God exists or the world is good, it asked about what was meant by statements about God or the good. By focusing on language and logic, it was able to avoid conflict with the natural sciences or even, as in the case of logical positivism, take them as their model.

Oosthuizen's doctoral studies in the Netherlands dealt mainly with Husserl, and his first academic articles provide careful restatements of the problems and perspectives of Husserl's phenomenology. After a year of study at Oxford in 1962, working with Gilbert Ryle, his orientation shifted decisively toward analytical philosophy. His continuing interest in philosophical questions related to perception, imagination, and related issues testifies to the enduring influence of Husserl, even after Oosthuizen had abandoned the idiom of phenomenology.

The range and intelligence of Oosthuizen's writing and teaching was crucial to establishing a clear identity for philosophy at the English-language universities in South Africa, casting it as a modern and secular discipline, capable of fitting in with an intellectual climate often defined by the sciences. He was not alone in this, and it would likely have happened without him. But he set a template in many ways for the next generation of English-speaking philosophers in South Africa, a number of them his former students.

Put differently, Oosthuizen provided a mode of analysis that enabled philosophy in South Africa to function with a global network, although sometimes at the cost of paying far less attention to its South African context than Oosthuizen himself would have countenanced. His use of analytical philosophy created a model for philosophy as an academic specialisation, but surely he never intended that it become a technical discipline accessible to specialist alone.

Oosthuizen himself never gave a programmatic description of his work in analytical philosophy. But the aspect of it that most attracted him stands out clearly. It is well captured in a famous passage from the preface to G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903), which might be read as an early manifesto for the analytic project in philosophy:

It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements of which history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions without discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer. I do not know how far this source of error would be done away, if philosophers would *try* to discover what question they were asking, before they set about to answer it; for the work of analysis and distinction is often very difficult... But I am inclined to think that, in many cases a resolute attempt would be inclined to ensure success.

Moore's programme offers a prospect of avoiding conflict about what questions are most important and how they are to be answered, or at least postponing it until all other means have been exhausted. It creates a preliminary field of discussion in which no-one need feel that their beliefs are under attack. All that is at stake is exactly what question they are seeking to answer in holding that belief. Once they have done that, it may of course turn out that there are in fact two or more questions at stake, each of which require a different answer, or that there is a logical or conceptual mismatch between question and answer, so that analysis of the logical form of a specific belief might take the place of more contentious discussion of its merits.

What was a new prospect when Moore offered it in 1903 is by now the air that most philosophy students breathe in the Anglo-American world, including the traditionally English-language universities in South Africa. For Oosthuizen in South Africa in the early 1960s, analytical philosophy offered the hope of making philosophical discussion possible where it was frequently made impossible by fundamental ideological conflicts.

Oosthuizen's personal and philosophical commitment to a Socratic model of teaching and communication was thwarted by the insistence – particularly among Afrikaner neo-Calvinist philosophers, including his colleagues at Bloemfontein – that religious commitments were decisive for all philosophical questions and that, short of persuading your interlocutor to adopt your own belief system, no philosophical progress was possible.

Analytical philosophy provided a modest programme, but one that could take small steps at least in the direction of clarifying beliefs and assumptions through debate and dialogue where no such progress was possible before. It offered the starting-point not of philosophical or theological abstraction, but of the everyday meanings of words, of concrete examples that would enable anyone who understood them to make the distinctions required to bring them in relation with our concepts.

The weaknesses of the analytical approach might not have been as apparent. It never addressed the possibility that conflicting philosophical or ethical beliefs might be related not to misunderstanding about what question was being answered, but to real social conflicts. In a context where beliefs were confused, or sought to respond to a range of separate problems at once, it could provide no incentive for anyone holding such beliefs to submit them to philosophical analysis. In this sense, it projected the philosophical classroom onto the rest of the world, assuming the commitment to intellectual clarity that Moore may have expected from his colleagues at Cambridge.

Above all, this approach ran the danger of multiplying distinctions and qualifications indefinitely – that is, without a clear sense of the degree of clarification needed to guide individual or collective norms or actions. If the main weapons in its armoury are those of logical and conceptual clarification, what incentive is there turn to other tasks? That incentive had to come from the real

world rather than from philosophical enquiry. But much depended on the philosopher's capacity to recognise and interpret the demands of their time and place.

IV Oosthuizen and the Radical Challenge

Oosthuizen's critique of Afrikaner nationalism came to a kind of culmination in the papers collected as *Analyses of Nationalism* in the first issue of *Occasional Papers* of the Department of Philosophy at Rhodes University (subsequently called *Philosophical Papers*). It was to be developed further in topical lectures, largely criticising attempts to justify apartheid on moral grounds. But increasingly the focus of Oosthuizen's work shifted toward the ethical problems involved in resisting injustice – a shift that is evident in the essays collected by Ian Bunting under the title *The Ethics of Illegal Action*.

Although he seldom, if ever, refers explicitly to the emerging movement among students and Christians to develop a radical critique of apartheid and attempt new forms of organisation and protest, it is clear that it is this generation that he is addressing. In the vacuum created by the crushing of African resistance to apartheid, culminating in the Rivonia trial in 1964 and the imprisonment of the ANC leadership, white student activism took on a significant role in extra-parliamentary opposition to apartheid. The founding of the Christian Institute, under the leadership of Beyers Naudé, led to new forms of activism within the churches.

The dissolution of the Student Christian Association in South Africa also created an opening for the formation of the University Christian Movement in 1967, much influenced by developments in the United States, including Black theology and protests against the Vietnam War. The UCM had a strong presence in Grahamstown, with Basil Moore serving as its first president. Oosthuizen spoke at UCM meetings on occasion and his support was clearly valued by its members.

Probably the most extensive, if one-sided, account of the UCM is that provided in the *Sixth Interim Report*, published in 1975, of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations, appointed by Prime Minister John Vorster. The Report does what it can to portray the UCM alternatively as a front for Marxism and Black theology (or to suggest that these are interchangeable) and to question its Christian credentials. It makes what it can of any sign of sexual or drug-related activity, or indeed any sign that UCM members formed part of a broader youth culture, with its characteristic patterns of experimentation and confusion. The Commission's reasoning is almost always tendentious and often just absurd. But it is probably true that many of the activists drawn to the UCM and similar organisations were not always clear about what they were rebelling against.

There are many reasons to suppose that the radical activists of this generation would have been disposed to listen carefully to what Oosthuizen had to

say. First, his critique of apartheid was posed in moral, rather than pragmatic terms. He was not arguing in the first place that apartheid was a counter-productive way of defending white interests, as many liberals did.

Second, although his ethics often rested on the most widely-accepted usages, it kept a conception of the individual as constituted in encounter with other people. He and others of his generation of Stellenbosch existentialists never really adopted the liberal model of the human being as the possessor of her or his attributes, values, etc. 'A Christian act of defiance', he writes in the title essay of *The Ethics of Illegal Action*, 'is unique and intimately connected with the character and history of the person who for Christian reasons feels that *he*, and no-one else, ought to act in this illegal manner on this particular occasion'.

Third, the nature of this fledgling movement was such that it was naturally oriented towards philosophy. How strongly this need was felt, may be seen from the way in which the philosophical work of Richard Turner was assimilated in student organisations and the trade union movement in the early 1970s.

Fourth, and not to be underestimated, Oosthuizen's personal qualities – his honesty, generosity, and lack of pretension – must surely have made him an attractive figure to a generation faced with hierarchy, privilege, and entrenched hypocrisy. A professor without concern for the outward signs of status is the exception today, and was surely that much more exceptional then!

It is easy to imagine that many individuals in that emerging movement drew strength from Oosthuizen's critical contributions, but hard to see how the movement they were part of could have done so. His philosophical ethics, in dealing with illegal forms of resistance, tended constantly toward the conservative middle ground. 'A Christian act of defiance', he says in the same sentence I quoted earlier, 'will have to be such that it is undoubtedly Christian, that is, the one and only appropriate reaction for a Christian to undertake had he been in that situation'. He constantly puts himself in the position of the individual standing at the threshold of political commitment, ruling out of consideration the possibility that the threshold might be crossed.

In his own life, as distinct from his philosophical work, it is clear that Oosthuizen was less hesitant. One of his former colleagues has described Oosthuizen's role in attempting to skirt the banning order on Terence Beard, in defiance of the Grahamstown security police. In that context, he embodied another ethic, as in his testimony on behalf of Hugh Lewin, his former student convicted of sabotage initiated by the ARM. But Oosthuizen could make of this ethic a larger, collectively accessible, political horizon.

Oosthuizen's ethic of dialogue was in this sense self-defeating, it seems to me. To preserve the position as potential interlocutor from which he could engage in the widest possible range of dialogue, he forfeited a political position that could actually be put forward in that dialogue. Although he abandoned Kierkegaard's existentialism, he retained its pessimism about any theory of

ethical and political change. Dialogue alone – that is, dialogue without a theory of ethical change – became dialogue without a real interlocutor.

V Concluding Remarks

There is much in Oosthuizen's life and work that richly deserves to be remembered and kept alive on an occasion like this one: the ethical intent of his philosophising; his consistent focus on the burning questions of South African society, no matter how painful or intractable; his intellectual seriousness, insisting that short-cuts, or failure to think things through, would be a recipe for trouble; his willingness to explore new approaches and perspectives, drawing on existentialism, phenomenology and analytical philosophy without treating any of them as sectarian truth. All of these qualities were manifest in a peculiar integrity, and the humility that was its counterpart.

Oosthuizen's limitations were the result of the same qualities for which he is rightly remembered. In a deeply-divided society, he found himself unable to locate himself – or more accurately, his philosophical work – on either side of the divide, at a time when the emerging movement for liberation was critically in need of a philosophical framework. Whatever Oosthuizen's personal sympathies may have been, his conception of philosophy required him to remain at the threshold, to focus on the tasks of the philosophical preparation in a way that effectively denied there was a historical task for which this preparation was needed.

The question of whether Oosthuizen's work will speak to a fourth philosophical generation in South Africa – of whether his legacy will have a life that extends beyond those who knew and respected him personally – depends on the unfinished work of the period of radical critique and protest whose beginnings he saw in organisations such as the Christian Institute and the UCM.

The study-programmes, workshops, and often inchoate 'happenings' of NUSAS and the UCM took on more definite form in the period after the Soweto uprising of 16 June, 1976, and especially in the insurrectionary years of the 1980s. Worker education projects in FOSATU and later in many unions affiliated to COSATU, the labour movement's commitment to democratisation as an educative force, the project of People's Education initiated by the Soweto Education Crisis Committee, the growth of a Marxist historiography of South Africa, and the intellectual radicalism of university departments or clusters of departments, community newspapers and small, often illegal or semi-legal, publications – all of these held out the promise that systemic analysis of the fundamental structures of society, by or in engagement with large numbers of oppressed people, could become both a *tool* of liberation and part of its *content*. Whatever their differences, all these initiatives, and others, were fueled by the belief that a free society, after the end of apartheid, would massively increase the space and resources for critical enquiry and debate.

This is not what the end of apartheid has brought. On the contrary, space and resources have been rationalised, commercialised, placed in the service of the market and of capitalist profitability, and the perspective of public discussion is that of the technocrat. Sadly, the universities are playing their part in the re-orientation of South African intellectual life away from engagement with such questions and toward the needs of the marketplace and technocratic solutions imposed from above.

Looking back on that moment of the 1980s – let us say, the long decade of the 1980s, with its roots going back to the 1960s and its impact surviving here and there until today – it may seem that some part of its conception of liberation was a product of the excitement of the times. But it drew also on deeper and longer-standing patterns of South African intellectual life, which are increasingly forgotten or discarded now.

One of the major analysts of the liberation struggles of southern Africa, John Saul, in his forthcoming book, writes about the ‘next liberation struggle’ in southern Africa. That struggle is still in embryo, and it is as easy to scoff at its manifestations as it was forty years ago to scoff at radical student organisations. It will have to emerge on a very different, far more globalised, terrain than did the struggles against apartheid, Portuguese colonial rule, Rhodesian UDI, and the like.

If Oosthuizen’s legacy is to live on at all, this will happen through his work being developed to that it has something to say in that context. Whether his name is attached to that legacy is perhaps not the most pressing issue. On an occasion like this, it is right for us to celebrate Oosthuizen and commit ourselves to the ideals of academic freedom. But if this is to be more than a sentimental gesture, it also requires us to think about how the larger intellectual and moral endeavour which Oosthuizen exemplified can provide resources for that next liberation struggle.