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## Language and politics in the philosophy of Adam Small: some personal reflections

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Small's philosophy draws its inspiration from the humanistic tradition of Western philosophical thinking. His appropriation of this tradition is especially evident in his reformulation of the western legacy of "philosophy-as-dialogue". From this perspective, Small proceeds by way of a linguistic turn, in which *Kaaps* (the language of "ordinary", "simple" so-called "coloured people") is presented as a worthy conduit of human reason in the pursuit of dialogue and justice in apartheid South Africa, in spite of numerous attempts over the years by racist-inspired scholarship to reduce the language to the level of ridicule and caricature. This article seeks to evaluate the philosophical merits of Small's linguistic turn, in which the "will-to-dialogue" is postulated as the normative context for exploring the question of the possibility of being-human in apartheid South Africa. **Keywords:** intellectual conscience, humanism, *Kaaps*, linguistic turn, philosophical reason, will-to-dialogue.

### Introduction

The process of recognizing and acknowledging Adam Small's status as a South African philosopher of note has been dogged over the years by controversy and scepticism. Small's determination to represent (in *Kaaps*) the suffering experienced by the "coloured" working class community of the Western Cape has contributed to the suspicion that his concern with the "language question" was just an excuse to defend (and thereby justify) the problematic creation of "coloured" identity in apartheid South Africa. Moreover, Small's deliberate appropriation of aesthetics (poetry and drama) as the preferred medium of expression for his views, in spite of his formal training as an academic philosopher, has invariably raised questions over the years on where to "place" him in the South African philosophical landscape.

One of my earliest recollections of Adam Small goes back to a meeting during the early 1980s. At that time he was the Chair of the Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape. I had just completed my Masters degree in Philosophy, and I was anxious to meet Small who, in his capacity as external examiner, had had some rather interesting things to report about my thesis at the time. The real purpose of my visit, however, was to question Small on the rationale for his choice of "literature" (poetry and drama) as the preferred medium for "getting his moral-political message across". I was of the opinion at the time that Small's "message", if expressed in the

medium of philosophy, would certainly have had a much greater effect on the country as a whole. I was also convinced that the controversy that constantly surrounded his public image of a “brown Afrikaner” might have been avoided if he had chosen the “safer” environment of academic philosophical discourse for the expression of his views. I therefore put it to Small that his art (no matter how “committed”, “engaged”, “realistic”, or “authentic”) could never attain the universal appeal of the philosophical voice of reason. Small’s reaction to my criticism was something like this:

One cannot reason with those who will not reason. True dialogue presupposes a general assumption of rationality, truthfulness and openness to the views of others. This is a tall order at the best of times, but it does not mean that we must give up all hope of dialogue; it simply means that we must try to find another form of communication to get our message across. This is what philosophy demands of us (of me) at this stage of our history.

Small then proceeded to remind me of my admiration for the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who once claimed that in order to “do philosophy” we must all wear a mask, lest we perish in the face of reality which, according to Nietzsche (*Tragedy* section 7), is something too ugly and too painful to behold, hence the need for art as “metaphysical comfort”, given our alleged inability as human beings to live a “natural” life.

Small’s response to the Nietzschean account of the tragedy of the human condition was to wear the mask of the “brown Afrikaner”, not in order to embrace a philosophy of cultural relativism, but rather to redefine philosophy’s traditional concern with the universal from a particularistic-aesthetic perspective that foregrounds the concreteness of human suffering. According to Small, acknowledgment of human suffering is the condition of the possibility of truth. In this regard, his position closely resembles that of Theodor W. Adorno, who once questioned whether philosophy (any philosophy) is worth pursuing “after Auschwitz” (361), and who responded to his own question by claiming that philosophy only becomes worthwhile when “it lend(s) a voice to suffering [...] (as) a condition of all truth (17–18).

Small’s ultimate concern has been the historical possibility of authentic dialogue, a concern that places him firmly in the Socratic-Platonic tradition where the question of dialogue is inseparably linked to the possibility of justice. According to Small, the most significant appropriation of the Socratic-Platonic legacy of dialogue in modern times appears in the work of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber whose book, *I and Thou*, had provided him with the philosophical inspiration for the development of his own philosophy of dialogue. From this perspective, Small opposes the Nietzschean hypothesis that life is a “will to power” with the counter-argument: life is a “will to dialogue”. Small offers the idea of dialogue as the counterfactual (normative) context for exploring the question, “Is philosophy (any philosophy) worth pursuing during

(or after) apartheid?" Small's response to this question has been to reflect on the possibility of dialogue as the normative framework for the pursuit of justice. He writes:

True dialogue is no child's play. Descriptive categories, into which we fit ourselves, are imposed upon us every day, "by the needs of the times", by "tradition", and so forth, that it is no longer "natural" for us to engage in dialogue. The appendages of "Jew" and "Christian", "white" and "non-white", "white" and "brown", of "Nationalist" and "Liberal", and so forth [...] obscures us from the view of others, so much so that we must strive to meet one another in dialogue, without the masks (Small 32).

In this essay, I will evaluate some of the implications of Small's central moral-ontological hypothesis: life is a "will to dialogue". My evaluation will be preceded by a brief discussion of the postmodern critique of reason by way of the "linguistic turn". This will provide the relevant context for an account of Small's own version of the "linguistic turn", in which the language of ordinary people (in Small's case, Afrikaans, designated as *Kaaps*) is foregrounded as a worthy conduit of human reason in the pursuit of dialogue and justice.

### **The linguistic turn in philosophy**

The linguistic turn has arguably been one of the most revolutionary events in the tradition of modern Western philosophical thought. It owes its origins to the pioneering work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin and Ryle. Central to the linguistic turn is a rejection of the representational theory of language, in which language is construed as a transparent medium, capable of accurately reflecting an independent reality "out there". Implicit in the linguistic turn is a profound scepticism about philosophy's traditional status as provider of an epistemological metalanguage or metanarrative, which would serve as the normative-universal framework for validating and legitimating the knowledge claims of modern science and morality, a condition which Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as "the crisis of metaphysical philosophy" (xxiv).

The scepticism of philosophical postmodernism has especially been aimed at philosophy's traditional role as the "guardian of reason" (Habermas, "Moral Consciousness" 20). Postmodern scepticism has caused quite a stir in traditional philosophical circles by challenging the much-vaunted claim that the distinctive and unique status of "man" in the world is a direct consequence of the possession of reason. According to this view, it is the possession of reason that confirms the moral and ontological possibility for "being-human-in-the-world". It therefore follows that to doubt the presence of reason in any "other", is tantamount to doubting their

humanity (or humanness) as a person, hence the less than human status that has historically been associated with the various victims of “racial”, social, gender inequality and oppression across the world.

Much of the linguistic turn in philosophy has been inspired by Nietzsche’s attempt to overcome the metaphysical legacy of the Platonic tradition in which, Nietzsche claims, the philosopher has failed to take into account the historical origins of reason within culturally diverse human environments. It is from this perspective that he rejects the much-cherished philosophical assumption that our truth claims are grounded in universal “Truth”. Given the claim that “truth” arises in conditions of cultural-historical diversity and the contingency of human experience, Nietzsche accounts for the possibility of the metaphysical idea of “Truth” (as an idea of universal significance) by invoking the seductive power of the human imagination as a counter-argument to the alleged legitimacy and tyranny of the western metaphysical tradition, as manifested in the “will to power”. Nietzsche (*Portable* 46–47) writes:

What, then, is truth? A mobile marching army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

According to Nietzsche, philosophy is just another form of literature and, as such, it must freely and openly embrace the shifting sands of metaphorical and figurative language (in short, the human imagination) as the foundation for the possibility of philosophical reason. By acknowledging philosophy’s ultimate dependence on language as the condition of its own possibility, we are also acknowledging the “human-all-too-human” nature of philosophical reason. The assumption of an autonomous (universal) subject of reason (as the foundation of modern metaphysical thinking) is consequently displaced (“decentred”) by Nietzsche in favour of a more “historical” account of the contingent nature of philosophical reason. Richard Rorty (16) explains the implications of the Nietzschean linguistic turn as follows:

To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance [...] Since Kant, philosophers have hoped (to find) the a priori structure of any possible enquiry, or language or form of social life. If we give up this hope, we lose what Nietzsche called “metaphysical comfort”, but we gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature’s*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many [...]

The primary objective of the linguistic turn in philosophy is to render us more conscious of the role that language plays in determining “who we are”. In this regard, Habermas (*Knowledge* 314) accentuates the philosophical significance of the linguistic turn by asserting:

What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus. Taken together, autonomy and responsibility constitute the only Idea that we possess *a priori* in the sense of the philosophical tradition.

The linguistic turn challenges us to redefine the question of reason from a non-foundational perspective of language. It represents an attempt to overcome modernity’s legacy of the “pure” subject of reason (the disembodied universal thinker) by offering an alternative (narrative) account of “impure” reason (in the form of dialogue) as the point of departure for our understanding of human rationality. The narrative account of reason is based on an acceptance that the philosopher no longer has the luxury of a metaphysical foundation to justify and validate her truth claims; it embraces human fallibility as the condition of truth. According to Christopher Norris (20–21), the linguistic turn therefore requires that the philosopher:

[S]teps down from an imaginary privileged position *vis-à-vis* the cultural community at large, and learns to make peace with the fact that there are no valid methods, truths or techniques which would set philosophy firmly apart from other, less elevated forms of intellectual life. There is still a whole range of interesting narrative *connections* to make [...] without the illusion of a God’s-eye view.

### **The dictatorship of (Western) reason**

The Western philosophical tradition of modernity is a form of humanism that is deeply rooted in a philosophical sense of (rational) self-consciousness, as exemplified in the Cartesian dictum: *I think, therefore I am* (Descartes 8). Within the tradition of modernity, the self-definition of the human being as a “rational animal” constitutes the normative-universalistic frame of reference for acknowledging human identity from a moral perspective. Within the context of colonialism, however, acknowledgment of human identity is withheld, in spite of the universalistic nature of the normative foundations of modernity. From this perspective, the project of modernity is inconceivable without the colonial text of philosophical racism that has accompanied its emergence on the stage of world history. Insofar as the non-western “other” has been considered to be devoid of the power of reason, the Eurocentric discourse of modernity has betrayed the normative thrust of its own founding principle of universal humanism. In this regard, Tsenay Serequeberhan correctly points out that

“Eurocentrism is a pervasive bias located in modernity’s self-consciousness of itself. It is grounded at its core in the metaphysical belief or Idea [...] that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life” (142).

When confronted with cultural difference, the representatives of the Eurocentric discourse of modernity seek to justify the non-recognition of the “other” (as an equal) on the grounds of the alleged unscientific nature of the local, indigenous languages. In the colonial setting, the “primitive” languages of the local indigenous communities only have value to the extent that they can be used to communicate the wishes of the conqueror. The language of the colonial conqueror thus became the language that sets the standard for determining the possibility of “civilizing and christianising” the racialised “other”. The humanism of Western modernity cannot, therefore, include the humanness of the racialised “other”—that would be a contradiction in terms. From the perspective of Western modernity, cultural difference can only be accounted for in “racial” terms that reflect the superiority of Western civilization in general, and western philosophy in particular. In this regard, Georg W. F. Hegel (a leading representative of modernity) informs his reader: “the only thought which philosophy brings with it, is the simple idea of reason—the idea that reason governs the world and that world history is therefore a rational process” (27).

As is well known, Hegel’s philosophical account of world history places Western civilization at the pinnacle of human development. From this perspective, the philosophy of modernity has sought to provide moral justification for its dismissal of the non-western world in general, and the peoples of the African continent in particular, on the grounds that the non-western world does not have anything of cultural significance to offer to its western counterpart. The inhumanity of the project of philosophical racism (conceptualized as the binary opposite of modernity’s celebration of human reason) is clearly reflected in Hannah Arendt’s summary of the significance of Hegel’s philosophical anthropology for the European colonial project in Africa:

What made them (the Africans) different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skins, but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as the undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained [...] the only overwhelming reality [...] They were, as it were, “natural” human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality ... (192).

In the colonial context, reason as the foundation of the ontological and moral claim to “being-human-in-the-world” is reduced to the instrumental-strategic level of a brutal will-to-power, which can only be defended on the irrational grounds of philosophical racism. From the perspective of the Eurocentric conception of reason, only the presence of (Western) reason can determine the equality of the “other” as human

being, hence the dictatorship of (Western) reason as the condition of the possibility of non-recognition of the “other” human being.

### **The question of an intellectual conscience**

The political philosophy of apartheid as an expression of European cultural superiority was based on a denial of the humanity of the African person. In addition to the repressive role played by the more “obvious” organs of state (the military establishment, the security forces, the police), Afrikanerdom was also ideologically supported by prominent religious leaders and academics, the majority of whom found an enabling environment for their intellectual racism within the Afrikaner Broederbond.

In a political situation devoid of the possibility of a democratic process based on the universal principles of freedom and justice among equals, Adam Small avoided the option of a “people’s revolution” through violence; he pinned his hopes for change, instead, on the “conscience” of the Afrikaner intellectual in general and the Afrikaner poet-writer in particular. Against the background of a divided (“white”) Afrikaner community, Small detected in the writings of the more enlightened (*verligte*) white-Afrikaner poets and novelists of the day, a potential for radical moral-political change. In a public lecture, delivered while visiting the United States in 1971, Small identified the Afrikaner poet-philosopher, N. P. van Wyk Louw, as “the profoundest thinker that South Africa has had” (*Brown Afrikaner* 8):

[You] have two factions in the Afrikaner Nationalist structure. One faction contains hard-core protagonists of old-style apartheid [...]. I am thinking of the sort of apartheid which is based entirely on color and on nothing else [...]. You have this faction and then you have people who cannot think that way anymore. And these are people who have been influenced tremendously on a cultural level by someone like Van Wyk Louw and other thinkers, too. You would be surprised what influence novelists and poets have on our society there. But Van Wyk Louw has been *the* outstanding person.

Small’s faith in the intellectual conscience of the *verligte* (enlightened) white-Afrikaner literary artist is strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s faith in the “exceptional individual”—the ‘solitary’ artist, the ‘solitary’ thinker—whom he believed had a special role to play not only as the voice of social conscience, but also as an agent of transformation. In this regard, Nietzsche accused the majority of people—including the most gifted individuals—of lacking an intellectual conscience in the face of social injustice. According to Nietzsche, “*Not to question, not to tremble with the craving and joy of questioning [...]* that is what I feel to be *contemptible*, and this feeling is the first thing I seek in everyone: some foolishness persuades me ever and ever again that every human being has this feeling, as a human being. It is my kind of injustice” (quoted in Kaufmann 104).

For Small, there was hope for the oppressed for as long as the van Wyk Louws of this world still had the courage to write with an “intellectual conscience” in the face of social injustice. At the time, he was of the opinion that van Wyk Louw’s “loyal resistance”, as exemplified in the latter’s poetry and “cultural philosophy”, offered a moral platform for political change in apartheid South Africa (Small, *Brown Afrikaner* 9–10).

The promise of a better future began to fade, however, as Small was increasingly to realize that his hope in the *verligte* Afrikaner (with an intellectual conscience) had been misplaced. His despair was the consequence of a profound prejudice, emanating from the white Afrikaner community, which sought to question the legitimacy of Afrikaans as spoken by the working class “coloured” community of the Western Cape. This view, (still very popular today) seeks to demonstrate that “brown” Afrikaans does not constitute a language in its own right; it lacks the alleged scientific credentials of its “white” counterpart. Small interpreted this view as representing an extension of the racist belief that “coloured” people are not human beings in their own right, but the miscreants of miscegenation, endowed with an amoral childlike status, and therefore incapable of moral-political autonomy and responsibility in a democratic society.

The racist assumption of “coloured” inferiority was to fuel one of the most divisive debates in Afrikaner political and academic circles during the 1970s. The debate was focused on the question of whether to grant the “coloured” people political integration and “full citizenship”, on the one hand, or whether to follow the route of “parallel development”, on the other, by creating a separate “coloured” homeland. The latter option was eventually abandoned, but the idea that the “coloured” people constituted a separate “race” still persisted. The conventional racist narrative that seeks to place the “coloured” person somewhere “in-between” the racialised categories of black and white (as the biological product of miscegenation) has been well documented and is not my primary concern in the present context. One simply needs to recall Sarah Gertrude Millin’s evocative metaphor of “God’s step-children” (i–xiii), to get some idea, not only of the widespread scepticism about the nature of the human identity of the “coloured” person, but also of the extent to which the “coloured” person has been dehumanized by means of stereotypes aimed at reducing their humanity to the level of ridicule and caricature in a society where one’s personal sense of identity and human solidarity with the “other” could not escape the suffocating strictures of racist labelling.

Small’s idealism was tempered when he realized that the debate between the two factions, referred to above, was not going to produce the desired outcome of political integration and full citizenship. His optimistic confidence that the intellectual conscience of the white Afrikaner literary artist would spread across and beyond the Afrikaner community, as illustrated when he asserted, “You will find this [*verligte*—

MC] thinking breaking through into the thinking of other people—university professors, and lecturers” (*Brown Afrikaner* 10), would soon give way to a more realistic acceptance of the moral-political acquiescence and collusion among the majority of white academics with the racist political agenda of the apartheid state. In this regard André du Toit correctly points out:

Afrikaner intellectuals of necessity have a stake in the cause of Afrikaner culture but, with the rise of modern Afrikaner nationalism, commitment to the cultural cause has come to be almost inextricably bound up with vested interests in the Afrikaner power structures [...] A tangled heritage of ethnic loyalties has tended to blur the perceptions and enervate the moral courage of Afrikaner intellectuals generally (1).

It must have been disappointing for Small to discover how easily the white South African academic deferred to political pressure—and thereby betray the Nietzschean ideal of the intellectual conscience—either by openly supporting apartheid in the public domain, or by opting for a self-imposed “silence”, seemingly justified by invoking a traditional academic (prejudice?) privilege on the basis of which the more “serious” business of academic research must always take precedence over the “messy, untidy” business of politics. Pierre Hugo’s comments regarding the role of the majority of Afrikaner academics during the 1970s are certainly worth noting:

In all likelihood, most morally troubled Afrikaner academics of the time probably fell into the “go along and get along” category who [...] neither expressed “voice” publicly or within the system, but simply “exited”, opting instead for the quiet life in a stream of Afrikaner conformity. In doing so, these academics simply switched off their moral and critical antennae in the face of orthodoxy (48).

For Small, the collusion of the majority of Afrikaner academics with the racist ideology and political policies and institutions of the apartheid state represented a betrayal of the humanity of the so-called “coloured” people. He had always considered himself to be an Afrikaner who shared a common cultural heritage of humanism with all “other” Afrikaners. He was of the opinion that this common cultural heritage would be strong enough to triumph over the dehumanizing political philosophy of apartheid. Without the possibility of dialogue (as the rational means for exploring the possibility of human freedom and justice), Small was obliged to come to terms with the incredible power of the human imagination in the creation of myth, as the pathological alternative to the moral imperative of human communication in the public domain of politics. The long-standing idea of the (white) Afrikaner as a member of a “[c]hosen people with a God-given destiny” (Thompson 29), would privilege a form of philosophical solipsism that, in principle, ruled out the possibility of dialogue-across-difference. As a result, the political (public) sphere of dialogue was exchanged

for the apolitical experience of the “extraordinary”, which in turn rendered possible the normalization of violence in apartheid South Africa. In violation of the universally acknowledged human right to inclusion in the public sphere of politics (as the normative context for the pursuit of social justice), the apartheid state chose the path of myth to legitimize its racist ideology of white-European superiority, supremacy and exceptionalism. Thus we find J. C. van Rooy, chairperson in 1944 of the Broederbond, proclaiming:

In every People in the world is embodied a Divine Idea and the task of each People is to build upon that Idea and perfect it. So God created the Afrikaner People with a unique language, a unique philosophy of life, and their own history and tradition in order that they might fulfill a particular calling and destiny here in the southern corner of Africa. We must stand guard on all that is peculiar to us and build upon it. We must believe that God has called us to be servants of his righteousness in this place. We must walk the way of obedience to faith (quoted in Thompson 29).

The apartheid state had no need of democracy, since it already knew (by divine right) what was best for all. It would listen only to those who literally spoke the Afrikaans language in a manner that confirmed the racist prejudice of white supremacy. Furthermore, by pursuing a deliberate process of cultural amnesia regarding the historical nature and origins of the Afrikaans language, the state of apartheid sought to mythologize (and thus deny) its human-all-to-human origins in the European colonial project of capitalism and racism. In this regard, Isabel Hofmeyr does well to remind us that:

The story of Afrikaans literature [...] is generally predicated on a deeply rooted organic “Afrikaner identity” which rumbles through South African history and mysteriously unites all Afrikaners into a monolithic *volk*. However, much recent theorising on nationalism has shown that nations are almost invariably artificial and manufactured categories which can be unmasked as historically contingent. This contingency has to do with the sprawling and skewed development of capitalism (95–96).

### **Small’s linguistic turn**

According to Small, language is the key to the (self-) understanding of the human being. In the context of apartheid South Africa, Small’s appropriation of the Afrikaans language has signalled a linguistic turn, aimed at expressing his solidarity with a community that has largely been excluded from “the story of Afrikaans literature”. The geopolitical environment of the “coloured” townships of the Western Cape has provided the background for some of Small’s most celebrated poems and plays. Grounded in a common political experience of racialised “otherness”, Small’s literary

output has contributed significantly to a political narrative of oppression and liberation that has resonated far beyond the boundaries of the so-called “coloured” political experience. For Small, the Afrikaans language as spoken by the community that he represents is indeed a black African language.<sup>1</sup> Whether imposed from “above” or opposed and resisted from “below”, black Afrikaans cannot be denied its cultural and political significance not only for the so-called “coloured” people, but indeed for the “other” groups of the South African population as well. In spite of the denialism that has emanated over the years from politically correct and progressive thinkers, seeking to dismiss it as merely a function of political indoctrination (or false consciousness), Afrikaans continues to forge deep layers of solidarity among Black people not only in South Africa, but in Namibia as well.

In order to overcome the denialism referred to above, one would have to confront the “political unconscious”<sup>2</sup> in which the historical “truth” of the Afrikaans language has been suppressed for so many years. To this end, we would have to reestablish the link between the literary text (as meaning) and its political context of origin. Historical amnesia regarding the political conditions of the (im)possibility of Afrikaans as a black African language has contributed significantly to the development and perpetuation of a philosophical ambiguity in relation to questions such as “What is a ‘coloured’?” and “What does it mean to be ‘coloured’?” The ambiguity will persist for as long as these questions are predicated on racist assumptions of cultural purity and biological essentialism.

Small’s response to the questions above has been to conceptualize the black’s literary text not merely as the product of a narrowly defined ethnic consciousness, but more importantly, also as a function of the “political unconscious” of all South Africans. Embedded within that “political unconscious” is a metaphysics of race in which the essence, significance and meaning of one’s being-in-the-world is either positively or negatively connected with the experience of being-or-not-being-white in apartheid South Africa. From this perspective, Small’s linguistic turn attempts to demonstrate that black Afrikaans can provide a therapeutic form of intervention in the search for social justice by foregrounding not only the political perspective of the literary text, but also the (in)human relations that have provided the historical setting for the emergence of the myth that the “coloured” people constitute a “separate race”. While philosophy can, at best, only respond to the question of human identity in abstract arguments, it is art, according to Small, that can best capture the concreteness of human suffering. Small’s linguistic turn thus provides the conceptual space for exploring the question of human identity beyond “race”; his literary approach is aimed at capturing the concreteness of human suffering within the context of his broader commitment to a philosophy of humanism. As he puts it, “I want to believe in the literature of the twenty-first century or any future century! On condition that it remains a literature of being-human, of course” (*Kitaar* 84).<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, reactions to Small's literary output have been mixed and varied. On the one hand, there have been those who have condemned him for his alleged aesthetic complicity in the legitimization of apartheid-generated categories of "race", given his valorisation of the "coloured experience" in relation to the broader struggle for liberation in apartheid South Africa. G. Jonker for example, has criticized him as follows:

[Small] does not plead for the end of oppression in South Africa. Oh, no! He wants to shout open the portals of Afrikanerdom for the "brown man" [...] He wants to do this on the basis of an "alliance" (*Bondgenootskap*) and "partnership in adversity" (*Lotgenootskap*). And this alliance can only have one possible interpretation: an alliance to maintain the suppression of the majority: the partnership in adversity can only mean that their future will be linked with the maintenance of oppression (quoted in February 100).

On the other hand, there have been those who have praised Small for his contribution to Afrikaans literature in general and to Afrikaans drama in particular. According to his defenders, Small's significance as an Afrikaans writer lies in his subversion of the myth that Afrikaans has its origins exclusively in the privileged inner circle of the (European) Afrikaner tradition of cultural purity. From this perspective, Small has reclaimed the more hybrid origins of Afrikaans in the historical experience and cultural exchanges of the slaves, the Khoi-Khoi and San, and other indigenous peoples who lived at the Cape at the time of colonization. Reacting to Andre Brink's praise of Small's celebrated play, *Kanna hy kô hystoe*, Loren Kruger writes:

Brink's praise of *Kanna* as an Afrikaans play invited his Afrikaner readers to revise their sense of Afrikaans as a European language by acknowledging the African and other influences on their mother tongue. Written and performed in *Kaaps*, once the lingua franca of colonial Cape Town and later the mother tongue of a few million people known variously as "coloureds" or "brown people", *Kanna* penetrated Afrikanerdom's innermost defenses, by reminding the audience that the mother tongue of the *volk* was not a purely European language but one creolized by African and Asian influences (119–20).

Small's defence of *Kaaps* as a language in its own right clearly represents a critique of the racist-inspired claims that have sought to dismiss *Kaaps* as something "negative"—an aberration and deviation from Eurocentric conceptions and norms of cultural excellence. Furthermore, acknowledging the indigenous African and creolised Asian cultural roots of the Afrikaans language, would also require that we acknowledge the humanness of the racialised "other". From this perspective, Small's advocacy of *Kaaps* attests to his belief in the humanity of all those who speak the language. As he puts it in 1981:

Kaaps is a language in the sense that it carries the full fate and destiny of the people who speak it: their entire life, “with everything contained in it”; a language in the sense that the people who speak it, give their first cry in life in this language, conduct all their business in their life in this language, expectorate in the throes of death in this language. Kaaps is not funny or comical but a language (quoted in February 95).

Small’s conception of language (and his advocacy of *Kaaps*) is deeply rooted in a fundamental philosophical hypothesis: all human life is a “will to dialogue”.

### **The will to dialogue**

Small’s literary output, especially his poetry, is an attempt to draw attention to a fundamental philosophical principle: the human being is essentially a will to dialogue, regardless of historical, social, political or personal circumstances. Throughout his career, the theme of liberation has been closely associated with a fundamental conception of “man”, as a dialogical-rational being. In several of his poems, Small addresses the political theme of human oppression and liberation from the perspective of the biblical narrative of Exodus which, in effect, provides the hermeneutic framework for relating his own account of the “coloured” political experience in apartheid South Africa. The moral significance of the Exodus story cannot be overstated. According to Michael Walzer (7), it has become a “paradigm of revolutionary politics” in the history of political thought, whose significance he contextualizes by asserting, “The Exodus is a story, a big story, one that became part of the cultural consciousness of the West—so that a range of political events (different events, but a particular range) have been located and understood within the narrative frame that it provides. This story made it possible to tell other stories” (Walzer 7).

Given the political context of apartheid South Africa, Small’s choice of the Exodus story seems obvious enough, with the prophet Moses looming large as spokesperson and leader of the oppressed community. What is not so obvious, however, is the philosophical significance that Small attaches to Moses’ lack of self-confidence in the role of political leader. Throughout his representation of Moses, Small is at pains to keep the focus on the “human side” of a Moses tormented by self-doubt, a Moses who stutters, a Moses who does not quite know how to speak or how he should speak in the public sphere of politics, a Moses who committed murder, as illustrated in the opening sequence of *Kanna hy kô hystoe*:

and Moses was a stutterer  
yes Moses was a stammerer  
and Moses was a murderer<sup>4</sup>

By establishing a link between “speech” (*logos*) as the conduit of reason, on the one hand, and the political community (*polis*) as the public sphere of justice, on the other, Small reinforces his commitment to a time-honoured tradition of philosophical discourse, in which the human-all-too-human perspective is identified as the only appropriate normative foundation for the pursuit and practice of politics. According to the ancient Greek philosophers, we are condemned as human beings to live in the realm of the “political”. As Aristotle puts it “A [man] who cannot live in a society, or who has no need to do so because he is self-sufficient, is either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state” (1253a).

In keeping with the humanistic tradition of reason-in-dialogue, Small embraces the “political” as the fundamental condition of the possibility of “being-human-in-the-world”. According to Small, no one should be excluded from that possibility, not even one’s enemies. Moreover, the possibility of being-human through dialogue with the “other” is of universal significance; it cannot be restricted to the (un)chosen few. Moreover, given the psychological phenomenon of human fallibility in matters of “truth”, we cannot dismiss the stutterers of this world who speak a language “different” from our own on the grounds that their peculiar use of language testifies to some innate human defect, deeply coded into their genetic structural makeup. In Small’s political philosophy, the possibility of “true dialogue”—defined as being open constantly to the possibility of being addressed by the “other” in a mutual relationship of “I” and “Thou”—is the moral compass for determining how far we have come in our collective quest for a world, grounded in the concrete experience of being-human. In his unpublished lecture on Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, *What is Dialogue?*, Small writes:

The situation of you and I, just you and I, is the most concrete of all situations—that is why it is difficult to achieve [...] “Bundled together, men march without Thou and without I ... hostile and separated hosts, they march into the common abyss”—where there are no higher values anymore [...] In the words of Buber, human beings must strive for—[and] we should consider it an achievable possibility—a dialogical world (32).

## Conclusion

Adam Small’s philosophy has been the subject of much controversy and misunderstanding over the years. He has often been ridiculed for his stand on the “coloured question” in general, and his advocacy of *Kaaps* as a language in its own right in particular. In this essay, I have attempted to show that Small’s appropriation of the “language of apartheid” must not necessarily be construed as a consequence of a political “false consciousness”—inspired by the racist ideology of apartheid—but rather as the inescapable moral-political context for redefining the question of the possibility of “being human” in apartheid South Africa.

Small's philosophy of dialogue is an important contribution to our self-understanding as human beings. His philosophy represents a brave and commendable appropriation and adaptation of the universalist tradition of philosophical and religious humanism to the historical conditions of apartheid South Africa. His sensitivity to the question of language, as demonstrated in his deconstruction of the racist myth that Afrikaans is "the white man's language", is but a precondition for determining the single most important question that ought to engage and challenge the intellectual conscience of all South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa: *How can we reaffirm our faith in the dignity and worth of the human person, today?*

#### Notes

1. Here I use the term "black" to denote the view of Steve Biko (48) and other activists of the Black Consciousness Movement for whom "being black is not a matter of pigmentation" but a matter of political identity in the face of white oppression.
2. I have borrowed the term "political unconscious" from Fredric Jameson, who argues that the political perspective is "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (17).
3. "En ek wil glo in die een-en-twintigste eeu of enige ander toekomstige eeu se literatuur! Indien natuurlik oor menswees bly" (Small *Kitaar* 84, my translation).
4. "en Moses was 'n hakkelaar / ja Moses was 'n stamelaar / en Moses was 'n moordenaar" (*Kitaar* 7).

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