

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Chancellor's Award for outstanding academic career from the Stellenbosch University (SU) (2016)
- Distinguished Professor at SU (2014)
- Stals Prize for Philosophy from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (1995)

## DEFINING MOMENT

Having intended to complete a theology degree in preparation for ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church, he was enthralled by philosophy after attending just two classes; he enrolled for a philosophy degree and never looked back.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"My favourite place to visit is the Kruger National Park. I am absolutely besotted by the Kruger Park and whenever my wife and I get the opportunity, we go there."

## LIFE, DEATH AND THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH: A PHILOSOPHER'S TALE

Anton van Niekerk, who has dealt with many aspects of the philosophy of life before settling on the finality of death. "My latest book is on death; I have developed an interest in the philosophical significance of the phenomenon of death."

Completing his matric in 1971, Van Niekerk remembers at the time that he wanted to do medicine at university; he was even selected to enrol for an MBChB at SU. His interest at the time shifted when he had what he calls 'a religious experience'. "I decided quite abruptly in my matric year that I would not pursue medicine, but that I would do theology, and that I would prepare myself to go into the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church," he says. "In those days that was the way in which most people in the Afrikaans-speaking world of South Africa would eventually be confronted by philosophy."

After matric, Van Niekerk did not immediately do his national service in the army as was required in those days in South Africa. Instead, he enrolled for a BA degree in 1972 – the expected route for a prospective Dutch Reformed theologian. "You would have to first to do a normal BA, studying Biblical

languages and other social sciences, followed by a Bachelor of Theology degree at the Theological Seminary." From ambitions to become a theologian, temptation came in the form of philosophy which grew to fascinate him. "In the first year we mostly looked at the history of philosophy and logic. Having attended the first two classes, I immediately realised that even though I understood very little, this stuff somehow spoke to me, and so I pursued it."

He went on to major in philosophy as part of his BA, and in addition to his theology degree he simultaneously did an Honours and eventually a Master's in philosophy, attaining all his degrees *cum laude*. Then came the year 1979, which marked the end of the seven years required for him to prepare himself for the ministry, as he had completed his Master's thesis on critical rationalism in the same year. "I was fortunate to be awarded the Chancellor's Medal for the best student on campus for writing that thesis," he says. The next year saw him going into the army as a Chaplain, which meant he did national service for 15 months.

When a vacancy opened for a lecturing post at the Philosophy Department of the SU in 1981, his mentors at the university urged him to apply for it. "I was fortunate to have excellent mentors who eventually became very good personal friends of mine as well. They have been a great inspiration in my life." His mentors included people like Professor Hennie Rossouw who supervised his Master's and Doctoral degrees, Professor Willie Esterhuysen who is a life-long friend, as well as Professor Johan Degenaar who is very well-known in South Africa for his moral, political and religious essays, and vocal opposition to the apartheid regime. "It was a great privilege to work in close proximity to them."

He became a full professor at SU in 1989 at the age of 35. During his tenure as Professor he established a Centre for Applied Ethics within the Philosophy Department in 1990. "Up to the late 1980s, my research interests were mostly the philosophy of the social sciences and the philosophy of religion, with a special emphasis on the issue of the language of religion."

As the decade ended, Van Niekerk saw his interests shift to biomedical ethics, brought on by a serendipitous meeting of minds on the topic. "I found myself increasingly drawn into the world of bioethics. I found it utterly fascinating."





## CHANGE IN RESEARCH

His shift in research interest was driven largely by his appreciation of the relevance of philosophically-based moral approaches to the biomedical sciences. "Bioethics proves to us that philosophy, in its guise as ethics, is at the same time one of the most theoretical, yet also practical academic enterprises. It is all about value; the difference between right and wrong, and the complexity of thinking about moral problems and sorting them out," he says.

An academic of many ideas, he has spent his career arguing for right and wrong based on his research, and in one instance this has got him into hot water. "It made me well-known in certain circles for all the wrong reasons," he says ruefully. In 2011, Van Niekerk was assaulted in his office after publishing an article criticising the tendency in some parts of the Afrikaans press to downplay the atrocities of apartheid.

Through this incident, and his many years as an academic, he is thankful for his "marvellous wife" who is a successful businesswoman, as well as his three sons and three grandchildren. He recently published a book titled *Die dood en die sin van die lewe* (Death and the meaning of life) in 2017.

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# Legends of South African Science II

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