Making a distinction

The Penguin dictionary defines racism as, first, "the belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities"; and, second, as "hostility towards or discrimination against people of a race other than one's own". Racialism is simply referred to as "= racism". It is, therefore, understandable (albeit regrettable) why, on publication, the term "non-racialism" was twice changed to "non-racism" in the Difference and Diversity column that appeared on August 31.

However, it is essential that a distinction be made and maintained between these terms. Firstly, because non-racialism is a Constitutional "founding provision", elevated to specific mention in chapter one, along with the rejection of race-based discrimination and hate speech (the second version of racism in the dictionary). Secondly, non-racialism is widely used as the commitment, distinct from non- or anti-racism, of various movements (most extensively by the African National Congress, and most reflectively by the Unity Movement) in the struggle against segregation and apartheid. Thirdly, if racism is expanded to the extent that the first dictionary definition would have it, the term loses its impact, as will be seen below. Finally, to stimulate meaningful and constructive debate, it is essential that a distinction is made between non-racism and non-racialism.

Accordingly, what is meant by non-racialism? And what does the Constitution mean, and what has been implied (most often) and defined (hardly ever) as the meaning of that goal in the struggle towards a democratic, inclusive and just society?

We all reject racism because it refers to ideas and practices that, in the first place, accept that there are entities called races (the four apartheid categories in South Africa, for example); and, secondly, that there is a hierarchy of values and abilities ("traits and capacities") attributed as the inescapable essence of each of these social groups, values that denigrate and demean the "inferior" race(s). Hence, we accept non-racism or anti-racism as the praiseworthy rejection of such denigrating attitudes and the reprehensible actions that flow from those ideas.

It is, however, possible to accept that there are races without being a racist (this position probably holds for the overwhelming majority of South Africans — that is, after all, how we have been socialised, black and white, to accept that races exist). Hence terms such as multiracialism refer to a society of more than one race (as in "South Africa is a multiracial society"), and terms such as race relations refer to the relations between races. Within this everyday common sense perspective it is then accepted that there are essential biological differences between these race groups, recognisable through appearance (racialism), but we do not necessarily think that one is better than the other. We are just "different".

This is racialism, defined by Kwame Anthony Appiah as the position which accepts "that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into small sets of races".

And then there is non-racialism. I called this a "utopian" vision in the previous column, because it is actually the denial of racialism (and not just of racism). Non-

racialism refuses to accept that there are meaningful biological (or essentialist in whatever other way — cultural, religious, etc.) categories of people — other than our own constructions and maintenance of difference.

The "social constructions of reality", including the ones we call races, are very real in that they affect people's life chances, ways of acting in the social world and interpreting of events. However, they are constructions nonetheless. As such they can be disturbed, undermined, deconstructed. The project is utopian, but not impossible. Rejection of racism is common sense because it is degrading. Acceptance of racialism is common sense because we have no clear notion of what a world without race categories would look like.

So, non-racism is essential as a moral position (there is a near-universal rejection of racism). The Constitution goes further. As a founding value, working towards non-racialism it is essential, for without fixed notions of race there cannot be racism. Think about that. In South Africa colonialism, segregation and apartheid gave us the categories of four races. We have to ensure that a democratic South Africa gives us non-racialism. Not an easy task, but we need to make a consolidated, multi-pronged start. A good place would be to open discussion on what it means and how to achieve it.