



# What we say and what we do: The perils of ethical consensus

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## Significance:

A new book argues that South Africa could better fight poverty and inequality if the country recognised that caring for others is a duty. It is argued here that the problem is not that we do not all agree on the need for care – it is that we disagree on what that means. A more equal country is possible, not if we all claim to support the same principles, but if we acknowledge our differences and seek compromises between them.

Do South African women die violent deaths because the country lacks morality? Or because a complex set of social and psychological factors make violence against women more likely?

Does the country continue to live with high levels of poverty and inequality because its elite have an inappropriate ethic? Or because everyone agrees that this is a moral problem but the meaning they attach to the ethical words they use differs and a combination of past and current realities means that power resides with those who are happy to allow it to continue as they pay lip service to its moral repugnance?

These questions are raised by a chapter in the Human Sciences Research Council's latest *State of the Nation* compilation<sup>1</sup> which, as the title suggests, seeks to assemble a range of scholarly articles on the current state of South African society. The chapter<sup>2</sup> is written by the three editors of the 2021 volume and seeks to set the direction of the entire collection – the 18 chapters by a variety of authors on topics ranging from foreign policy to film-making were clearly meant to reflect the concerns argued in this chapter. The hope was not realised: the authors of many of the chapters do not examine their subject matter through the lens proposed by the editors. This is predictable: attempts to persuade contributors to collections to address a particular theme repeatedly fail as authors insist on discussing what interests them. But it does convey what the editors understand the present state of the nation to be. It also raises issues which are crucial to debates on the country's current realities.

## In search of an ethic

In essence, the authors argue that the state should become the vehicle of an 'ethics of care' which they ground in feminist theory and the anti-racist work of David Theo Goldberg:

*When decision-making is based on the values enshrined in the constitution – in which an ethical stance is inherent – then we will begin to realise the practical effects of a just and caring society.*<sup>2(p.15)</sup>

This concern for the ethical is central to what they hoped the collection would stress – the volume is entitled *Ethics, Politics, Inequality: New Directions* and some of the contributions place ethics at the centre of their concern.

It is easy to see what prompted this interest in ethics. Corruption has been an abiding national concern for a decade. The country is still living through a pandemic in which concern for the ill and vulnerable often seemed to be trumped by pressures to 'keep the economy open'.<sup>3</sup> The government remains convinced that economic health can be achieved by addressing the concerns of private investors rather than giving priority to poverty and inequality.<sup>4</sup> Media and politicians insisted that the only issue of importance to the recent local government election campaign was 'service delivery', a term which reduces democratic government to a technical arrangement much like that between a customer and a company rather than an ethical relationship between representatives and citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Less topically, but no less importantly, one of the many hangovers from pre-1994 South Africa which remains central to the national self-image is a celebration of conspicuous consumption: the media and other instruments of socialisation proclaim that ownership of consumer goods is the test of human worth – a message which has percolated deep into the society's consciousness: the last census reported that more South Africans owned television sets than owned refrigerators.<sup>6</sup> The governing elite did not invent this but it has done little to dispel it because its chief concern has not been to challenge the privilege a minority enjoyed under apartheid but to seek to ensure that everyone enjoys it. Thus, while former president Thabo Mbeki famously devoted a Mandela lecture to decrying the acquisitiveness of a new elite<sup>7</sup>, the policies of the government over which he presided encouraged precisely this.

But to understand this concern is not to accept it. An 'ethics of care' sounds attractive, but, on closer scrutiny, will not produce the change the society needs.

## Problems and pitfalls

First, states – and the political elites who govern them – do not exist in a vacuum. They may influence prevailing ethics, but are also influenced by them.<sup>8</sup>

The ethics of the South African state largely reflect that of the society's elite, the opinion formers who reflect and shape what the society is expected to value. We cannot consider the state's ethic – or lack of one – in isolation from the voices which frame the national debate. To name an example, we cannot understand the ethics of the state's response to COVID-19 unless we recognise that it reflects, and is shaped by, the concerns of the roughly one-third of citizens who enjoy some access to the national debate.<sup>4</sup> To argue for an ethic of care in the state



without addressing the values and understandings of the interests which influence the state's ethic is to address the symptom, not the cause.

Second, the claim that poverty and inequality and their attendant ills are products of an inappropriate ethic or no ethic at all is curious as the authors acknowledge that such an ethic does exist 'inherently' in the Constitution. There is surely no one within the state – or among elites outside it – who openly rejects the Constitution and the values which underpin it. And yet poverty and inequality persist, as do corruption, violence, and racial and gender bigotry. The problem is not the ethics that key social actors acknowledge, but that, in good or bad faith, they choose to interpret a common stated ethic in ways which leave inequity untouched or worsen it.

In February 2021, when he presented what was to be his last budget, then Minister of Finance Tito Mboweni indignantly rejected claims that it was a vehicle for 'austerity' – he said it allowed for substantial spending on social services.<sup>9</sup> So fervently did he feel about this that he began arguing his point before the criticism began. When it did begin, critics pointed out that, 'each of the 250 pages in the Treasury's Budget Review' stressed the need to reduce government spending<sup>10</sup> – that this was indeed an austerity budget. It was, among other features, the first budget in a long time to cut social grants in real terms, reducing the lifeline on which many who live in poverty depend.

What is important for our purposes is why Mr Mboweni felt any need to hotly deny that his was an austerity budget. Many Ministers of Finance in many parts of the world proclaim their budgets to be exercises in austerity, insisting that spending less on social needs will rescue their economies. In those countries – and in this one – austerity budgets are usually greeted with fervent praise from business analysts and the media. Mboweni had been appointed at a time when public spending was, in the view of mainstream economists, close to ruinous and so he had a plausible reason to acknowledge the real nature of his budget. He insisted that it was not an austerity budget because proclaiming that the poor will need to go without is ethically unacceptable to the state and to the governing party. As the example illustrates, this does not necessarily mean that they do give priority to fighting poverty. But they know that they would be flouting the prevailing ethical consensus if they acknowledged that this is not what they were doing.

Mboweni's fealty to an ethic his Treasury did not feel bound by in practice is hardly unique – it is ubiquitous in the public debate. It has become common to insist that any proposal a lobby, political party or commentator dislikes will 'hit the poor hardest' and that their favoured reforms would do the opposite. This makes it inevitable that policies which would benefit people in poverty are denounced as harbingers of greater penury and those which would worsen poverty and inequality are justified as boons to the poor. To quote but one example, one theme in repeated assaults on social grants is that they 'create dependency'. All the evidence points in the opposite direction – grants are, in the main, used to boost local economies and make it easier for people not to be dependent.<sup>11</sup> But the prevailing ethic ensures that insisting that people in poverty should get less to sustain an economy from which others benefit disproportionately is unacceptable. Those who believe that they should pay a price insist, therefore, that they are motivated by concern for the poor – lip service to the ethic justifies policy stances which are likely to deepen poverty and inequality.

The problem is not the absence of an ethic but that its presence enables anyone who seeks respectability to proclaim a concern they do not share. Supposed ethical agreement which obscures damaging difference is not new – it was identified in 1995 by the scholar and activist Harold Wolpe in a critique of the Reconstruction and Development Programme White Paper which was to prove his last published article before his passing.<sup>12</sup> The White Paper, issued by the Government of National Unity which comprised the African National Congress, National Party and Inkatha Freedom Party, contained a preface by then President Mandela asserting that the 'interdependence of reconstruction and development and growth' was now widely accepted by all the country's interests.<sup>12</sup> Wolpe<sup>12</sup> argued that this premature announcement of a consensus hid deep divisions between both the parties in the government and the

society's economic actors: '...the tensions cannot be eliminated by fiat of the RDP'.

At the time, Wolpe's critique was confirmed by the fact that just about all social actors who wanted to promote schemes ranging from tougher policing through to personal or company profit insisted solemnly that what they wanted would advance the aims of the RDP. Since then, it has been confirmed by repeated government summits on economics and development which began during the Mbeki presidency in the early 2000s and have been partly revived by the Ramaphosa administration. These events tend to end with interests committing themselves to common goals none have any intention of pursuing. They sign because they do not wish to be seen to be defying the regnant moral consensus.

Neither the RDP White Paper nor the outcome of the summits were explicitly about generating a common ethic. But, like the ethic the authors see in the Constitution, it is 'inherent'. Mandela's formulation claimed consensus on an 'ethic of care' which held that addressing poverty was at least as important as economic growth. The summit agreements required that parties promise to look beyond their own interest and acknowledge those of their 'social partners'. But in both cases, persuading potential opponents to endorse an ethic is the easy part. The more difficult, but much more important, task, is to ensure that they interpret it in a way which reduces poverty and inequality and ensures that care is, as the authors put it, 'corporeal', that it assists real flesh-and-blood human beings, remains elusive.

The most obvious example of the dangers of a proclaimed ethical consensus which hides deep difference is the mainstream debate's treatment of race since 1994. Apartheid was so decisively discredited that no one who seeks even minimal respectability would admit to supporting it or desiring its return. And yet racial attitudes which implicitly or explicitly endorse white supremacy as they proclaim their opposition to apartheid are ubiquitous: measures aimed at undoing the effects of minority rule are thus labelled 'a form of apartheid'.<sup>13</sup> The supposed ethical consensus hides deeply unethical commitments to racial domination.

A similar problem faces the quest for gender equality. It has become equally unacceptable to insist that men are superior to women. But this has not ended male supremacist action and attitudes. The disjuncture has arguably grown. Violence against women, described by the odd technical term borrowed from international agencies Gender Based Violence, has been the subject of campaigns actively promoted by the current President.<sup>14</sup> Initiatives by men exhorting men to respect women have become fairly common – but not as common as continued violence against women. The professions of equality may be sincere. But they illustrate the limits of a shared ethic which seems unable to change behaviour.

The authors are aware of the problem: they insist that an 'ethic of care' is 'a duty and a set of practices designed to alter, modify or repair dimensions of inequality'. But who decides what practices really do ameliorate inequality? In a constitutional democracy, different interpretations are not only allowed but celebrated. People who interpret the ethic by insisting that an end to social grants and trade union bargaining are essential to the fight against inequality have as much right to be heard as those who believe they would worsen it. In a society in which everyone agrees that care is appropriate but no one agrees on how that care should be expressed, the stress on an ethic simply continues what we have now.

Third, a stress on the need for an ethic can encourage moralising which substitutes for attempts to seek solutions. Violence against women is again an example. Whenever a new example emerges of a woman murdered or maimed, often by an intimate partner, the public debate is awash with people denouncing the act. But these responses have taken on a ritualistic form and do far more to proclaim the ethics of the speaker than they do to protect women. The moralising also rarely acknowledges that men who murder women are unlikely to stop because of public campaigns which stress the ethic of care. More effective than ethical piety would be campaigns for concrete, specified, measures which would reduce violence and support victims. It is open to serious question

whether femicide and male violence directed at women is the product of an ethical failure rather than the same reality which is fuelling white nationalism in the USA and Europe: the belief by dominant groups that their dominance is under threat and that the dominated must be shown who ought really to be in charge.<sup>15</sup> The remedy would then surely be not new ethics but new power relations.

## Conclusion: Recognising difference

The notion that South Africa may be redeemed by an ethics of care is more likely to entrench than to threaten poverty and inequality.

A key reason is that, since 1994, a spurious moral consensus has reigned in which stated support for equality often entrenches inequality. If the idea of an 'ethics of care' were to take hold, we can confidently expect it to be embraced loudly by all political parties, most citizens' organisations and much of the media – and by advertising agencies and marketing departments. It would obscure the need for new power relations in a cloud of goodwill.

The road towards a more equitable society lies not in another attempt to unite all behind another stated ethic. It lies, rather, in its polar opposite – the acknowledgment of difference, in ethics and the interests they often express, and a willingness to negotiate these differences, an approach which this author has sought to develop in a recently published book.<sup>16</sup> Negotiation is impossible as long as racists, patriarchs and xenophobes hide behind the rhetorical fig leaf which an 'ethic of care' would provide. Holders of privilege would need to be coaxed out of their current shelter behind an apparently common ethic and pressed to negotiate a path which would acknowledge some of their core interests but would also reduce privilege.

The result would not be a utopia in which everyone subscribed in word and deed to the same ethic of care. Attempts to create this inevitably justify coercion as measures to end poverty and inequality. But it would be a richer, more equal, society precisely because it would have recognised its ethical divides and would have found ways of negotiating them in ways which would allow new voices to be heard and new power to be created.

The way out of the impasse lies not in a new quest for apparent ethical sameness, but in the more rewarding but difficult task of living with difference which does not impose domination.

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