

Editorial:

Thoughts on how the *African Journal of Business Ethics* might evolve

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I have been editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Business Ethics* for just over a year now. This is enough time to get a sense of the inner workings of the journal, the ebb and flow of papers, and, perhaps most importantly, some of the challenges and opportunities of our journal. And so, armed with this accumulated insight, I thought it was high time that I sat down and put some ideas on paper as to how I would like to see the journal evolve, certainly under what remains of my tenure as editor-in-chief, but possibly also beyond that.

1. Three issues

But before I jump head first into a context-less, forward-looking exercise, I think it is necessary to first highlight three contextual issues (or problems) at the nexus between the business ethics literature (both in the *African Journal of Business Ethics* and more generally) and Africa. It is these three issues that underpin how I would like to see the journal evolve.

1.1 Issue 1: “The native is declared insensible to ethics” (Fanon, 2001:32)

There is nothing really new in my first contextual observation. Indeed, it is something that has been visited and revisited by pretty much every anticolonial scholar from Césaire to Biko, from Sobukwe to Nkhurma. However, in my mind, and in my all too limited reading of these scholars, it is best captured by Fanon in his harrowing words, “The native is declared insensible to ethics” (Fanon, 2001:32).

But this is all in the anticolonial literature. What about the business ethics literature? Well, declarations of this sort, more

often than not minus the air of protest, exist in this literature too. As an example, a few years ago some colleagues and I had a paper rejected by a prominent ‘global’ business ethics journal. It was a paper that presented a critical perspective of the International Integrated Reporting Council’s <IR> Framework (IIRC, 2013) based on empirical work carried out in South Africa. There were of course numerous reasons for the rejection. However, one in particular offended. In building up their argument that an empirical study from Africa had limited generalisability (see Issue 2), one of the reviewers wrote:

On the other hand, developed economies (such as Western Europe) grasp sustainability reporting better. (Anon, 2018)

This sentence is essentially a sub-argument based on the following implicit premises:

Premise 1: Economies grasp things when the people who constitute those economies grasp things;

Premise 2: Sustainability reporting is a practical response to complex moral issues;

Premise 3: People constituting developed economies are superior in their moral intellect than people constituting developing economies;

Therefore: “...developed economies (such as Western Europe) grasp sustainability reporting better.”

Dressed in this way, the dehumanising offensiveness of this sub-argument, particularly premise 3, becomes patently obvious. Of course, I am sure that the reviewer in question did not intend any such dehumanising offense. In fact, I am almost certain that they gave no thought whatsoever to the underlying premises upon which their argument might be based. In effect, I suspect that this was simply an instinctive expression of Fanon’s prejudice, an instinctive expression of “common sense” (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021).

That the offense was more than likely unintended does not, however, render the argument any less problematic or any less worthy of complaint. While stereotyping is a quite normal, and possibly even necessary, aspect of human cognition (Allport, 1954), its negative consequences cannot be overstated. In considering the impacts of stereotyping on out-groups, Fiske captured the essence as follows:

Without stereotypes, there would be less need to hate, exclude, exterminate. ... People do not want to be stereotyped because it limits their freedom and constrains their outcomes, even their lives. In short, stereotypes exert control. (Fiske, 1993:621)

In the context of many “developing economies”, and certainly in the context of Africa, this particular stereotype of the moral superiority of people in the West, has obviously had particularly unpleasant history. As Allsobrook and Boisen put it:

... colonialism and other forms of explicit imperial control are legitimated, not by rights of conquest, but, on the basis of guardianship or trusteeship, grounded in a teleology of salvation, or civilisation, of subject peoples expressed in terms of improvement, progress, welfare, development or happiness.¹ (Allsobrook & Boisen, 2017:265)

Hence the focus on this by anticolonial scholars.

These out-group problems associated with dehumanising stereotypes are, however, not the only difficulty. Another, is the corollary false positive stereotyping of the in-group. In the context of business ethics specifically, this problem was highlighted in the call for papers for the 2018 European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) research conference which I will quote at length:

Also the common explanation that corruption and other forms of fraudulent behavior are caused by the existence of corrupt environments especially in less-developed or developing countries, due to low salaries, weak infrastructure, disorganized administration and unstable political conditions in such countries, proves not to be valid. From this perspective, corporate malpractice of western companies has been downplayed as a kind of 'some-bad-apples-theory' where a few ill-motivated actors jeopardize the honesty of the whole system. This, however, cannot explain why it was namely western multinational corporations that have been involved in contemporary corruption scandals in recent years. Even though most of these companies ostensibly had anti-corruption programs and monitoring systems in place, such measures obviously did not prevent management from engaging in fraudulent activities. It seems therefore that corporate malpractice is a widespread and common phenomenon in the business world.²

Expressions of this general prejudice (in both its negative and positive forms) are of course not limited to reviewers and authors coming from the so-called developed world. As Africans, we are more than adept at the "self-hatred that comes as a package with colonialism" (Baloyi, 2020:n.p.). Certainly, our propensity to buy into this prejudice raised by Fanon seems to rear its ugly head repeatedly in papers submitted to *African Journal of Business Ethics*, which are of course authored primarily by African scholars. The most frequent starting point for sustaining this self-hate that I have come across in initially screening manuscripts submitted to the journal (and probably even in reading around business ethics in Africa more generally) is Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. As we all know this consistently places African countries as the worst performing countries in the world.

At this point, I would like to beg your indulgence as I challenge this index a little. Even the most cursory critical reflection on this, throws up very significant difficulties. For me the most striking of these is always Switzerland. Now Switzerland routinely occupies a position in the five *least* corrupt countries on the planet. One wonders how the 'little' matter of the infamous Swiss banking industry, a major (if not *the* major) conduit for the flow of money linked to global corrupt activities over the past century at least, manages to evade perception?³ Switzerland is of course not the only 'little' anomaly. There are many more: other 'dirty' banking industries dotted around Western Europe (in particular); corporate lobbying and political party funding across the developed world, but particularly in the USA; and of course, the supply-side of perhaps the dirtiest of all industries, the global arms industry which is dominated by countries occupying the index's top 25% of supposedly least corrupt countries. But perhaps pointing out these

'little' anomalies are not necessary to undermine this index. Perhaps it is sufficient simply to note that any *perception* index contrived in a context that is so rife with stereotype is surely going to be fraught from the outset.

But I digress too much. Especially given that this index has been much more systematically critiqued by De Maria (2008). Suffice to say, I think that my first issue, that "*the native is declared insensible to ethics*" (Fanon, 2001:32) is well and truly registered.

1.2 Issue 2: The odd provinces, the odd provincials

My second issue also begins with something of an autoethnographic reflection on the academic review process. Any African scholar will be able to relate demeaning stories about reviewers who will reject their manuscripts based on an argument that goes something like this:

While your paper is well written, it is difficult to see the global relevance of the research.
(Anon, 2016)

Or like this:

The context within which your work was conducted is very local, severely limiting the generalizability of the paper's conclusions.
(Anon, 2018)

In response to criticisms such as these, one might bitterly cry: "But this is not fair!" In support of this cry for justice, one might draw attention to the fact that we, as African scholars, are routinely (one is even tempted to say generally) subjected to papers where the central arguments are shamelessly premised on some idiosyncratic contextual feature of a former colonial or present neo-colonial power. One might complain about how these essentially parochial arguments slide, apparently effortlessly, into the literature on tracks greased with the fallacy that Western Europe and the USA are the centre of the universe. That they are in fact 'The World' and that the rest of the planet and the rest of humanity are simply odd provinces and odd provincials, respectively (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

But we all know where such a cry for justice would get us nine times out of ten. Exactly nowhere. If any response to such a cry were to be forthcoming at all, it would inevitably look something like this:

It is unfortunate that you have elected to adopt such a reactionary and paranoid interpretation of the criticisms of our reviewers. These were intended to be constructive. Remember these reviewers are leaders in their field and beyond reproach. In any event, the editor's decision is final and we wish you luck in finding another home for your paper.

This protest/response is of course entirely imaginary. The rules of the game really preclude most of us from engaging in such protest. This is, after all, the world of publish-or-perish and no-one really has time to waste engaging in futilities. So what is it that we typically do as African scholars?

Well, it doesn't take reading all of the submissions to the *African Journal of Business Ethics* for a year to know the most common answer to this question. What we do, is play to the ignorance of many 'leaders in their field' regarding the world outside of their enclave and make wild claims that our local studies are in some way representative of 'The Developing World'. In other words, we frame our studies as a developing world perspective. In doing this we inevitably dilute rich descriptions of the real contexts of our studies with a load of rubbish about this mythical unity called 'The Developing World'.

1.3 Issue 3: What, there are no African philosophies?

Which brings me to my last observation. There is far more to African stories than simply the contextual or the material. There are also the ideas: the epistemologies, the ontologies, the axiologies. If you like there are the continental philosophies.

In this regard, a very quick scan through the back issues of *African Journal of Business Ethics*⁴ drawing out the most obvious themes and a few of the more interesting obscure ones is rather revealing (Figure 1). Anyone who is reasonably familiar in the 'global' business ethics literature will feel right at home here. General corporate social responsibility, the teaching of business ethics, business ethics in small businesses, sustainable development, corporate culture, and corporate governance have all been very prominent themes over the years. All of these would map very easily onto prominent themes of the 'global' literature.⁵

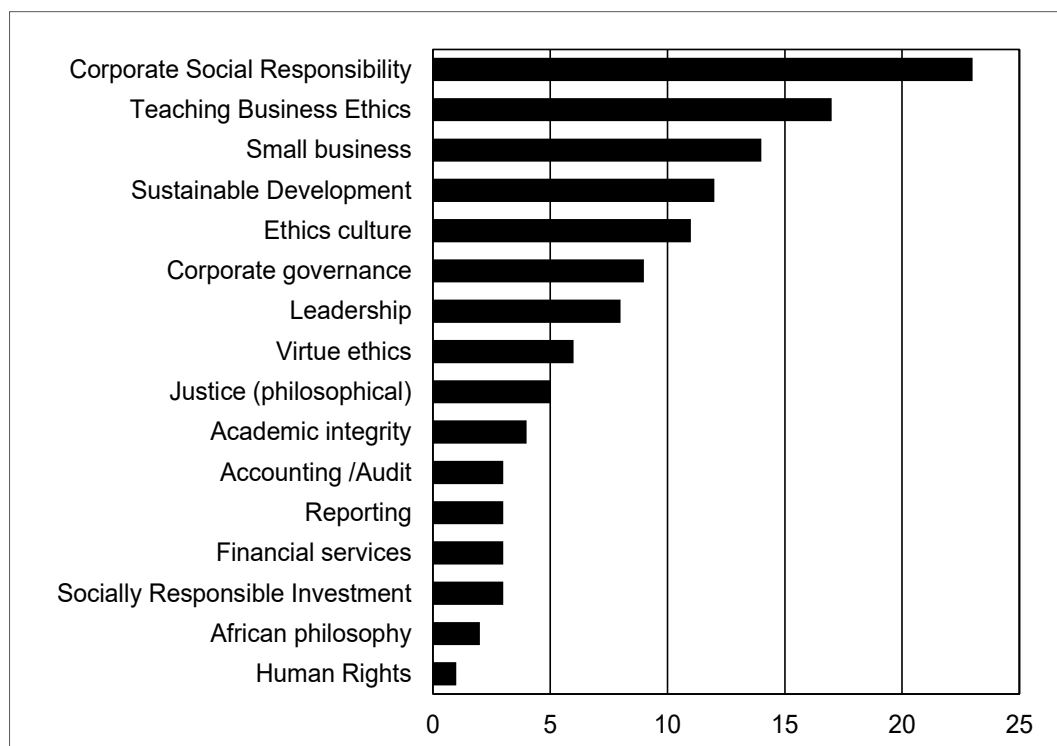


Figure 1: Themes evident in past issues of *African Journal of Business Ethics* between 2014 and 2020.

Looking specifically at the philosophical themes that emerged, an explicitly African philosophical perspective was found in exactly two out of the 107 papers published in seven years! Compare this to the frequencies of papers which focused on what I labelled as “Virtue ethics” and “Justice (philosophical)”. I should point out that, without exception, these were Western in their particular expressions of these philosophical traditions. In terms of “Virtue ethics”, Aristotle, Aquinas and of course MacIntyre prevailed as authorities as is so popular in the ‘global’ business ethic literature. And in terms of “Justice (philosophical)”, Rawls reigned supreme.

In the final analysis the overwhelming impression here is surely one of thematic mimesis, and specifically philosophical mimesis. We have, it seems, fallen into the easy groove of just doing what is done in ‘*The World*’.

2. And the point is?

Much of what I have written above is likely to be seen by many, particularly those in the West (or in ‘*The World*’ if you like) as a bit of an unconstructive critique about the oppression of Africans. Our oppression under the declaration that we are insensible to ethics. Our oppression through the rejection of African stories as irrelevant. Our oppression through the neglect of African ideas and philosophies. Our oppression by ‘*the leaders in the field*’. And of course, our oppression by ourselves. And make no mistake, I most certainly was agitating. However, raising these three issues is really not the main point. It is the starting point, premised on the assumption that it is out of the recognition of certain problems that we can begin to construct solutions. And this is where this reflection becomes forward-looking.

This spirit is most easily illustrated with reference to the first issue. As I mentioned, there is nothing really new in this issue. Likewise, there is nothing new in the promise that emerges out of drawing attention to it. But it is a very profound promise and so worth reiterating. Once again, Fanon is a good place to begin in articulating this. Having raised the prejudice, he then went on to write the following:

The native is declared insensible to ethics ... In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms ... The native knows all this, and laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other’s words. For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.

(Fanon, 2001:32-33)

In other words, for Fanon, the recognition of the dehumanising prejudice of “The native is declared insensible to ethics” is nothing short of the first step in a grand humanising liberation of Africans.

So what are the implications of this in terms of the editorial intent for the *African Journal of Business Ethics* specifically? Well, in this regard, I think it is worthwhile to state what my intent is *not*. Firstly, it is not my intent that we will suddenly pursue an editorial

policy which seeks to assert that, as Africans, we are somehow blessed with superior moral intellect to those that constitute “developed economies”. Such an assertion would simply be an act of offensive dehumanisation in precisely the same way as its opposite claim is.⁶ Secondly, it is not my intent to pursue an editorial policy which moves to deny that very grave problems exist in Africa, or that many of these might quite legitimately be traced to shortcomings in the moral intellect, or perhaps more correctly the moral will of certain individuals.

What I am, however, calling for is that, when we write about our problems, we examine very carefully the impulses of our colonised or colonising minds to begin with the assumption that we are inherently insensible to ethics or that immorality is somehow endemic to Africa. And let me say that desk-reject decisions will occur for any paper which says: “Compared to the developed world, African countries, and countries in the developing world more generally, are characterised by rampant corruption and ethical failure.” Ethical failure is pandemic.

Enough on editorial and broader implications of the first issue. What about the second issue? My editorial intent in this regard is that we will be a journal that absolutely celebrates stories from Africa, about Africa, and about Africa in relation to the rest of the world. We will do this for no other reason than that we are infinitely curious about the richness of experience inherent in the diversity of our continent and her people. In this regard, I have two corollary appeals to prospective authors. Firstly, please don’t describe ‘*The Developing World*’ and how your study is generally representative of this unless you have a sampling design that can realistically claim to be representative of this thing. Secondly, please feel free to invest extra narrative effort in describing the specifics of the context where your study was actually undertaken. In fact, I insist that you do invest this effort! I want to know what your specific research context feels like, what it smells like, what it sounds like, what it looks like. I believe readers want to know the challenges and joys that life in general and business in particular throws up in your specific corner of Africa.

And finally, in terms of the third issue, let me start again with what my point is not. It is not that Western ideas and philosophies are un-useful, or that we will suddenly begin rejecting papers that examine African issues from the vantage point of these theories. Absolutely not! As Fanon (2001:121) pragmatically put it, it makes all the sense in the world “to put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it [an intellectual class] has snatched when going through colonial universities” (Fanon, 2001:121). However, I believe that it is high time that as the *African Journal of Business Ethics* we become much more deliberate in our intent to highlight ideas from Africa. It is entirely possible that, on critical scrutiny, we will find these ideas have no place in relation to business. Or, put slightly differently, that business has no place in relation to these ideas. But this is ours to discover. And we can only really do this if we take the time to consider ‘*African philosophies, business in Africa and around the world, and where these collide*’.

In the final analysis, a name means something. In the case of this journal, the *African Journal of Business Ethics*, the name of this journal tells the world proudly that this is, or at least that it ought to be, an *African* 'space'. A 'space' in which African stories, ideas, values and conventions find expression, prevail and have impact both here and throughout the rest of the world.

Endnotes

- 1 This notion of a legitimising narrative is quite tantalising when one juxtaposes the findings of the AU/ECA (2015) report on illicit financial flows from Africa against Kühn, Stiglbauer & Fifka's (2018) findings that corporate social responsibility efforts in Africa seem to focus much more strongly on philanthropic efforts i.e. efforts that might be seen as attempts at conjuring an impression of "improvement, progress, welfare, development or happiness".
- 2 Source: <https://bit.ly/2XkUNKM> [Accessed 24 April 2018].
- 3 As recently as this year, evidence has surfaced of the ongoing involvement of the Swiss banking industry in facilitating corrupt practices (Romy, 2021).
- 4 This included all issues available on the *African Journal of Business Ethics* website (<https://ajobe.journals.ac.za/pub>). This comprises a total of 21 issues in 14 volumes starting with volume 3(1) in 2014 and ending with volume 14(1) of 2020. In total, there were 107 papers.
- 5 A quick glance at the major section themes of *Journal of Business Ethics* (available at <https://www.springer.com/journal/10551/editors>) as (arguably) the most prominent of the 'global' business ethics journal supports this proposition admirably.
- 6 And as Freire (1993:26) noted: "In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity ..., become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restore the humanity of both" (Freire, 1993:26).

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