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# Planning to change the world? Questioning the normative ethics of planning theories<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

We begin with the assertion that epistemological standpoints shape – and are shaped by – ethical principles and that *epistemologies of action* are constantly evolving. Yet, while many contemporary planning theories are influenced by post-structural and postcolonial epistemologies that recognise the value of subjective and situated knowledge, work on planning ethics tends to retain a focus on normative ethical theories. This focus precludes further explorations of the *nature* and *meaning* of adopted ethical values. By means of a case example, we suggest that some engagement with meta-ethical questions might offer scholars of the global South-East an alternative basis for developing knowledge.

## Keywords

Cape Town, global south, meta-ethics, normative ethical theories, subjective values

## Introduction

In order to craft our argument, it seems prudent to begin with a few claims that most readers might agree on. First, planners operate ‘at the interface of knowledge and action’ (Campbell, 2012b: 135; see Friedmann, 1987). Next, working at this interface often necessitates spatial interventions, which, in turn, set planning up as a normative project. Third, adopted epistemological standpoints contribute to how we know and how we hope to act in accordance with this knowledge since ‘ways of knowing the world bring the world into being’ (Merriman et al., 2012: 10). The knowledge that planners might profess to have in order to act in and on the world is therefore often described as an *epistemology of action* (Forester, 1991; Thomas and Healey, 1991; Vicar, 2012). Finally, how we act on or towards individuals, groups and objects depends not only upon our adopted

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epistemological standpoints but also upon our value-based judgements (or ethics), because ethical principles guide decision-making processes and actions. In sum, planning interventions necessitate an awareness of how we know (epistemology), some kind of action, as well as value-based judgements (or ethical principles).

Moreover, and as we already know, *epistemologies of action* undergo periodic shifts in accordance with ever-changing philosophical understandings of the world. Thus, during one moment in history, ‘bringing the world into being’ served colonial or technocratic ends, whereas contemporary ways of knowing and acting in the world might serve to bring the *Just City* (Fainstein, 2010), or the *Intercultural City* (Sandercock, 2003), or the *Ordinary City* (Robinson, 2006) into being. The issue of relevance to our argument is that epistemological standpoints shape – and are shaped by – ethical principles.

Granted, epistemology and ethics are usually considered as two distinct philosophical domains. However, when epistemology appeals to the character traits of an epistemic agent as a condition for the formation of knowledge, it may then be argued that ethical commitments function as a productive component of the epistemic process (Code, 2007; van Fraassen, 2007). Contemporary planning theories are replete with appeals like ‘fair’, ‘respectful’ or even ‘ordinary’ character traits, and these character traits and values contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation of the *Just*, the *Intercultural* and the *Ordinary City*. Seeing ourselves as epistemically responsible agents presupposes that planners’ epistemic commitments involve ethical choices that carry a degree of responsibility since planners might be held responsible for the choices they make.

Two additional claims to those presented in the opening paragraph might then include the following: first, ethical choices inform the acquisition of knowledge, and vice versa (Code, 2007; van Fraassen, 2007). Next, ethical choices and epistemic processes respond to situated contexts, as people and objects, groups and institutions, are not merely given, but are instead open to subjective and context-dependent interpretations (Beauregard, 2012; Friedmann, 2005). These additional claims suggest the need for some engagement with the *nature* and *meaning* of the value-based judgements that planners employ when they hope to intervene at the interface of knowledge and action. For us, such an engagement necessitates a deeper exploration of meta-ethics.

Meta-ethics is the branch of moral philosophy that is concerned with the study of moral concepts, language and thought. Whereas the fields of applied and normative ethical theories focus on ‘what is moral’, meta-ethics focuses on ‘what morality itself is’ (Jacobs, 2002: viii). And in contrast to the field of normative ethics – which is occupied with the question of *what should be done* – meta-ethics seeks to understand the *nature* of ethical evaluations, as well as the presuppositions and commitments of those who engage in moral discourse and practice. Normative ethics presupposes that some ethical judgements are better than others, while meta-ethics asks questions *about* moral thought, judgement and value without attempting to discover what the ‘right’ (or ‘better’) course of action is.

However, since the study of meta-ethics explicitly desists from engaging with how we *ought to plan*, some scholars of planning ethics dismiss meta-ethics as irrelevant to planning theory and practice. Thus, for some, further explorations of the *nature* and *meaning* of planning values are deemed superfluous. Argued differently, because the normative idea of planning rests squarely upon ‘a search for a better future’ (Healey, 2012: 199), it

is assumed that planners instinctively know what the *nature* and *meaning* of ‘better’ entail. For the purpose of our argument, the word ‘better’ is used because ‘better’ can be substituted for adopted epistemological standpoints and related ethical values. Thus, and somewhat crudely, ‘better’ from a *Just City* standpoint entails a more equitable city, while a ‘better’ city from a multicultural standpoint necessitates, among other value-based criteria, a more respectful and inclusive city.

So, while planners might accept that knowledge and actions are embodied, historically grounded and embedded in context-specific power relations, accompanying ethical principles tend to concern normative (or first-order) ethical values alone. A reason for this predominant focus on normative values in planning theory is presented by Stein and Harper (2005) who argue that ‘contemporary planning theories rest on normative ethical theories’ (p. 148). However, this normative ethical focus precludes further explorations of the *nature* and *meaning* of adopted ethical values. Such observations then beg the question: why do some scholars of planning ethics assume that planners instinctively know what ‘better’ entails? Asked differently, why is the scholarship on planning ethics rooted, almost exclusively, within a normative ethical framework? By engaging in this line of inquiry, we are neither suggesting that the idea of planning needs be conceptualised as something other than a normative project nor are we questioning the normativity of planning per se. Rather, we are questioning the normativity of planning ethics by asking scholars to consider, if only for a moment, why the *meaning* of ‘better’ remains an assumed ethical principle, regardless of ever-evolving epistemological understandings of situated contexts.

Our consideration might be of particular interest to scholars who are calling for alternative ways of theorising ‘the African urban’ (or the global South-East). For many of these scholars, the problem with planning theory stems from the geopolitical dominance of knowledge production within the global North. Accordingly, dominant epistemological positions are identified as necessitating change, while the normativity of planning values is ignored. Yet, alternative ways of theorising planning might rest not only with how we know and act in the world but also with how we might theorise ethics from subjective standpoints by starting with John Mackie’s (1977) assertion that ‘there are no objective values’ (p. 15). This line of theorising is, nevertheless, cautious of the various deconstructive attacks mounted against normative planning theory since, as argued by Campbell (2012b), such attacks might leave scholars with few options other than to accept naivety, relativism or nihilism as alternatives. We do not seek to contribute to this deconstructed landfill of planning theory. Instead, we hope to invite discussions around how we talk about and define the *nature* and *meaning* of ‘better’ (or equity, respect, inclusiveness), given the diversity of values that characterise the many activities that planners perform. Such an invitation might also begin to address Healey’s (2012) suggestion that the normative idea of planning ‘demands consideration of what “better” could and should mean’ (p. 199).

However, initiating Healey’s suggestion requires a different analytical approach than the more conventional methods employed by some scholars who tackle the field of planning ethics (Campbell, 2012a, 2012b; Campbell and Marshall, 1999; Hendler, 1996, 2001; Lo Piccolo and Thomas, 2009; Marcuse, 1976; Stein and Harper, 2005; Thomas, 1991; Thomas and Healey, 1991; Wachs, 1985). Instead of focusing on what ‘planners

should do' (Campbell, 2012a, 2012b) – where *should* or *ought* questions hone in on first-order normative ethical concerns – our analysis is geared towards second-order meta-ethical concerns. For us, it is difficult (if not impossible) to answer normative ethical questions before engaging with meta-ethical questions that include, for example

- What is the *nature* and *meaning* of an ethical planning judgement in a situated context?
- How do planners know whether their interpretation of an ethical value is better (or worse) than the interpretations made by others? (Asked differently, how may moral judgements be supported or defended?)
- How does the subjective understanding of a better (or worse) planning intervention vary from person to person, context to context or culture to culture?

Grappling, however fleetingly, with meta-ethical concerns allows us to consider the subjective *nature* and *meaning* of value-based statements, attitudes and judgements from a situated standpoint (Garner and Rosen, 1967; Mackie, 1977). Moreover, if 'planning cultures worldwide exist only in the plural' (Friedmann, 2005: 184), then such considerations become relevant. By contrast, answers to normative ethics questions suggest that planners are sufficiently knowledgeable to endorse some ethical judgements while rejecting others. This may be said even if some scholars hint at meta-ethical concerns when suggesting that 'it is the nature of "better" that requires engagement with ethics' (Campbell, 2012a: 393). But instead of delving deeper into what this nature means and how we might know whether something is 'better', scholars tend to retreat into a normative ethical comfort zone where the idea of planning is simply something 'better' in-and-for-itself. By way of an example of this tendency, let us turn to Campbell (2012a: 393) who, after urging us to engage with the *nature* of 'better', quickly moves on to argue that

The tendency in theory and in practice to focus on 'best', rather than 'better', is deeply counter-productive. Despite much academic debate which might suggest otherwise, there is no need for a perfect definition of, for example, justice or equality [in order] to take actions which will reduce injustices and diminish inequalities. Moreover, that such actions will fall short is no great intellectual revelation. The revelation lies in the ability to envisage better actions, which will deliver better outcomes in the future.

While planners might not require perfect definitions of justice or equality in order to act, we, nevertheless, maintain that there are subjective – and sometimes conflicting – understandings of ethical values such as 'justice' or 'equality', as our succeeding example from Cape Town demonstrates. Without exploring some of the subjective understandings of the ethical values we adopt, planning actions might cause more harm than deliver better outcomes. We therefore cannot assume that all participants in a planning project subscribe to the same understanding of ethical values such as 'justice' or 'equality'. But for Campbell and others, justice and equality remain unquestioned ethical principles that negate further explorations.

By contrast, meta-ethical positions are purposefully designed to examine how we come to know subjective interpretations of ethical values in the first instance<sup>2</sup> (Garner and Rosen, 1967; Mackie, 1977). They respond to the semantics of moral discourse and

how ethics affects us as embodied human agents. Unlike normative ethical theories, meta-ethical explorations refrain from evaluating value-based judgements as being 'good' or 'bad'. We are therefore less interested, in the first instance, if a planning decision is deemed to be 'good' or 'bad'. Rather, we first wish to understand what planners mean when they subscribe to values such as 'justice' or 'equality'. Arguably, only once we have engaged with meta-ethical concerns, may we be able to identify some 'basis for judging what *should* be done' (Campbell, 2012a: 391).

The aim of this article is twofold. First, we aim to explain how and why the scholarship on planning ethics tends to concern normative ethical theories alone. This explanation necessitates some exploration of the field's philosophical roots in English-speaking contexts. We then go on to demonstrate that a normative ethical focus exists in many planning theories, despite the influence of post-structural and postcolonial epistemologies that value subjective and place-based knowledge. Second, we aim to illustrate, by means of a case example, the implications of meta-ethical concerns. Methodologically, we employ both a critical discourse analysis and case study research findings. But in order to initiate our discussions, we begin with a brief description of different meta-ethical positions.

## Exploring different meta-ethical positions

There is a considerable history of philosophical work on meta-ethics, as well as a significant diversity in the approaches taken by different authors. And while it is not within the scope of our article to provide an outline of this history, for the purpose of clarity it is important to identify some of the different meta-ethical positions. Accordingly, meta-ethical theories are usually discussed in terms of three broad categories: *semantic*, *substantial* and *justification theories*. Within each of these categories, we find further distinctions, even if all three approaches focus on the meaning of morality itself (Jacobs, 2002).

First, *semantic theories* respond to the question of what moral terms and judgements *mean*. These theories are further divided into cognitive and non-cognitive approaches. Cognitive approaches are capable of evaluating moral statements as being either true or false.<sup>3</sup> And within the general category of cognitivism, we find the idea of moral realism, which holds that ethical propositions are made true by objective features of the world that are independent of subjective desires, beliefs or attitudes. Two main branches of moral realism exist in the form of ethical naturalism and non-naturalism. The basic idea of ethical naturalism is that objective moral properties exist, and these can be understood in terms of properties and facts (Jacobs, 2002). Ethical non-naturalism, on the other hand, holds that a moral value cannot be explained in terms of natural properties and facts alone (Jacobs, 2002). George Moore and others, including William Ross, are commonly associated with this non-naturalistic approach. And in many respects, it was Moore (1903) who paved the way for meta-ethical discussions through his critique of the 'naturalistic fallacy'.

Anti-realist approaches, in turn, disagree with the notion that moral values are features of reality that are independent of what people feel and believe. Such positions further include ethical subjectivism and error theory. Ethical subjectivism denies that moral

propositions refer to objective facts. Instead, for ethical subjectivists, moral statements depend on the subjective interpretations, attitudes or conventions of people. Whereas ethical subjectivism holds that ethical claims can and do express subjective propositions, error theory (which is most commonly associated with John Mackie's work) holds that all such propositions are false.

Unlike cognitive approaches, in non-cognitivist semantic theories, ethical sentences are seen as neither true nor false as true and false sentences fail to express genuine propositions (Jacobs, 2002). Ethical concepts such as 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' therefore do not assert something to be true or false of the thing in question, but, rather, *express* something else, such as an emotion. And while non-cognitivism dominated ethical theory for much of the first half of the 20th century, it was Philippa Foot's (1978) critiques of the distinction between fact and value – as well as her defence of cognitivism – that provided a major impetus for the 'rational character of morality' from the 1960s onwards.

Next, *substantial meta-ethical theories* attempt to answer the question: what is the *nature* of moral judgements? Here, the main division of thought lies between universalist and relativist positions. Moral universalism holds that some systems of ethics apply universally since some systems are derived from a universal understanding of human nature, universal reason, a common ground and universal moral codes. By contrast, moral relativists hold that all ethical judgements originate from societal or individual standards and that no single objective standard exists with which to assess the truth of a moral proposition. Moral relativists thus react not only to truth claims but also to all attempts to determine standards. Accordingly, terms such as 'good', 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' do not describe things in terms of universal truth conditions, but only in relation to societal conventions and personal preferences. What *ought to be done* cannot, therefore, be based on some independent or universal standard of evaluation. Rather, answers to normative ethical questions are rooted in different societal or individual norms.

Finally, *justification theories* attempt to respond to the question: how may moral judgements be *supported* or *defended*? Justification theories (in a cognitivist frame) often imply epistemological theories. Some positions thus hold that moral knowledge is gained inferentially on the basis of an epistemic process. For example, an empiricist position entails the notion that observations and experiences can provide a foundation for moral knowledge and moral facts. However, this position usually confronts the *is-ought* problem (in that what *is* is often not a sufficient basis to determine how we *ought* to act). By contrast, moral rationalism broadly describes a position whereby moral truths are knowable through our powers of reason. Here, there are a number of different moral truth positions. For example, those subscribing to some form of contractarian theory (including John Rawls, David Gauthier and Thomas Scanlon) hold that moral principles may be ascertained 'on the basis of what rational agents would agree to do, or accept as binding' (Jacobs, 2002: 157). In this view, rational reflection and agreement become the basis for establishing a social contract (that is accepted by all). Here, rights and obligations rest upon the content of the social contract, and these rights and obligations do not exist prior to the social contract. As we will discuss shortly, planning's ethical roots are founded on aspects of social contract theory. For ethical intuitionists, however, some moral truths



can be known without inference. George Moore argued that goodness is a simple non-natural property capable of being discovered by intuition (Foot, 1967). William Ross, on the other hand, argued that we have non-inferential, direct knowledge of certain moral duties (Jacobs, 2002).

In sum, there remains much debate between scholars who claim that there are moral facts that are 'real' and 'objective' (in the sense that values exist independently of any beliefs or evidence about them) versus those who argue that moral values are socio-culturally constructed and embedded in situated power relations. For the purpose of our engagement with meta-ethics, we ask the same type of questions as those found in semantic, substantial and justification theories. And we employ some aspects of non-cognitivism and moral relativism in order to critically reflect on our Cape Town-based project. In doing so, we aim to explore questions concerning the *meaning* of value-based judgements (by drawing from non-cognitive approaches), as well as the *nature* of these judgements (by drawing on moral relativism), since our research findings suggest that planning (and other) values are socio-culturally constructed and embedded in local politics. Nevertheless, our meta-ethical explorations explicitly desist from establishing criteria for making ethical judgements about the kinds of situations represented by our case example. Establishing such criteria would be a distinctly normative project, namely, one that aims to develop some authoritative model by which other things may be judged. We are aware that meta-ethics cannot assist us in deciding which ethical principles are right or wrong, better or worse, or how we should plan. Rather, our use of meta-ethics allows us to begin to understand how planners (and other actors) distinguish between 'better' or 'worse' decision-making processes and outcomes, how they arrive at a moral judgement in the first place, how they employ ethical principles in practice, and how they justify their interventions on ethical grounds. Such engagements might also enable us to critique, challenge and rethink our own presuppositions and justifications. But before presenting our case example, we need to understand how and why contemporary planning theories tend to retain a focus on normative ethical theories. Let us now turn to this discussion.

## Tracing planning's predominant focus on normative ethics

The idea of planning for a 'better' society emerged in English-speaking, liberal contexts at least two-and-a-half centuries prior to the establishment of planning as a professional activity. This *idea*, as argued by Bridge (2000: 519, 521; see Figure 1), was founded not only on a normative ethical position but also on a 'strong universal ethical scope' that sought to remedy the self-interested concerns of 'individuals acting consistently [and only] in their best interests'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this *idea* became the basis for several versions of social contract theory (Bridge, 2000).<sup>5</sup> In the Hobbesian world, for example, the pursuit of selfish interests placed individuals in conflict with others.<sup>6</sup> Hobbes' (1986 [1651]) solution, the *Leviathan*, was for liberal individuals to relinquish certain freedoms by engaging in 'social contracts' with one another, which, in turn, authorised the establishment of 'a common good'. After all, instilling ethical values of 'a common good' was deemed paramount for 'the smooth running of society; or, indeed, for society to be possible at all' (Bridge, 2000: 521).



By the late 1700s, Jeremy Bentham endeavoured to refine social contract theories and 'common good' values. Until then, ethics concerned, for the most part, rules of proper conduct (Friedmann, 1987). 'But Bentham, convinced that any worthy idea had to be practical, focused on the consequences of action which he made the basis for ethical judgment' (Friedmann, 1987: 51). Bentham's influence on European thought was immense, even if different nations selected different tenets of his message. In England, scholars turned their ethical gaze towards a liberal utilitarian understanding of consequentialism. And for these scholars, a *better* consequence was one that secured the most *happiness* for as many people as possible. In Bentham's (1948 [1789]) words, 'it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the ultimate measure of right and wrong' (p. iii). Ethical values based on 'right' or 'wrong' judgements squarely placed utilitarianism within normative ethical concerns. And because *happiness* was deemed to be a common good, if not a universal desire, no further interpretations of the *nature* and *meaning* of happiness seemed necessary.

Planning in English-speaking contexts is rooted within these utilitarian and normative ethical foundations (Friedmann, 1987; Huxley, 1999; Stein and Harper, 2005; Winkler, 2011). Thus, by the end of the 19th century, solutions to social problems were linked to spatial concerns because it was believed that the spatial realm 'shaped and even determined the characteristics and character of the individual' (Rose, 1999: 114). But spatial thought was not merely about representing the city with all its dilemmas (as found, for example, in Charles Booth's sanitation studies of 19th-century London). Rather, it was also bound up with a normative project of intervening from an objective and scientifically based standpoint, whether through Patrick Geddes' and Patrick Abercrombie's survey-before-plan approach or later through the production of detailed master plans under the influence of the Rational Comprehensive Model of Planning. Town planning was thus to deliver the 'good city' through concerns for aesthetics and order, while safeguarding the utilitarian principle of 'a common good' (Huxley, 1999; Muller, 1992; Roy, 2008). However, planners seldom felt compelled to justify their work from an ethical standpoint since a planning action that was based on rational, objective and scientific knowledge was deemed to be a sufficient justification for what *ought* to take place (Freestone, 2000; Friedmann, 1987).<sup>7</sup> Consequently, focus was placed on how to remedy identified spatial problems, while ethical concerns remained subsumed within matters of procedural correctness and professional integrity.

It was only once an explicit epistemological break from the Rational Comprehensive Model was called for that a greater engagement with 'planning ethics' began to surface. This engagement coincided with a recognition of the political nature of planning (Davidoff, 1965; Freestone, 2000; Hall, 1988; Klosterman, 1978). And by acknowledging the political role of planning, some scholars sought to challenge the then-assumed value-neutral stance of professional institutions and governing councils. To this end, Marcuse (1976: 265) insightfully cautioned against the problem of simply equating ethics with a 'system-maintenance interpretation of occupational ethics', because

[By] accepting the social utility of the occupation, and [by] asking how that utility can best be enhanced, [we serve only to reinforce an] assumption that a reputable planning profession is

itself a matter of social value, [while the *meaning* of planning's social value remains] unquestioned. (p. 265)

By means of this caution, Marcuse began to grapple, however tentatively, with meta-ethical concerns. He also questioned the idea of planning as an activity geared around 'unrealistic goals [that were] unachievable within the limits of prevailing structures' (Marcuse, 1976: 267). But instead of delving deeper into the *nature* and *meaning* of diverse social values in situated contexts, Marcuse's project remained, for the most part, a concern with normative ethics. This concern shaped his 'structural transformation' position. From this position, he explored six approaches to ethics – namely, subjective, pluralist, objective, egalitarian, process and structural approaches – but concluded that only 'the structural approach' was relevant to planning as a political activity.

Systemic structural change necessitated a re-conceptualisation of 'narrow client–professional relationships' (Marcuse, 1976: 270). Marcuse thus called for wider ('common good') interpretations of professional values. However, Marcuse's wider interpretations were based on abstract and universal understandings of ethics because 'structural transformation' values – like equity, justice and democracy – were perceived to be 'better' values in-themselves. Such values then desisted any further interpretation from a subjective standpoint since, presumably, planners instinctively knew what was meant by equity, justice and democracy.

By the turn of the 20th century, moral philosophy was no longer solely embroiled in *right* or *wrong* actions or with *ought* and *should* ethical questions. The study of normative ethics thus declined as meta-ethics grew in prominence. However, with the publication of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the focus of moral theories once again shifted to normative ethics. The Rawlsian idea of 'the original position' – from where self-interested and rational individuals would choose to live in risk-adverse societies – thus became the moral basis for a 'rejuvenated conception of normative ethics from a universalist, impartial, and liberal-individualist perspective' (Bridge, 2000: 520; see Rawls, 1971).

And while Rawls' (2001) later assertions recant universal ethical positions, Rawlsian philosophy – with its dominant focus on normative ethics – remains a key influence on planning theory and ethics (Howe, 1990; Stein and Harper, 2005). Explicitly stated, 'Rawls' normative ethical theory provides a firm moral basis for much of contemporary planning theory' (Stein and Harper, 2005: 148). Of further significance, for Harper and Stein (1992: 1050) and many other scholars, 'debates in planning theory need to be understood as debates about underlying normative ethical theories'. But let us explore this assertion a little further by demonstrating how some contemporary planning theories retain a focus on normative ethical theories, irrespective of post-structural and postcolonial epistemological influences that value subjective and place-based knowledge.

Habermas' (1984, 1987, 1990) theory of communicative action acknowledges, in the first instance, the existence of stakeholders' subjective and competing ethics. Yet, in order to proceed from this initial meta-ethical acknowledgment and in order to arrive at an ethics of action, Habermas' (1990: 120) procedural discourse ethics necessitates the production of 'normatively right statements based on good reasons'. 'Good reasons', in turn, might eventually allow us to 'reach consensus on generalisable maxims' (Habermas,

1990). Moreover, necessitating a consensus on ‘generalisable maxims’ implies an unquestioned shift from situated and subjective ethical values to – what Bridge (2000: 519; see Figure 1) refers to as – a ‘weak universal’ ethics of action:

For Habermas, an ethical norm is universal if all affected [parties of a communicative process] can accept the consequences of an ethical norm, and that these consequences are better than the alternatives. (p. 523)

In the same way that Habermasian procedural discourse ethics moves from recognising situated and subjective values to positing ‘generalisable’ ethical norms, communicative and collaborative planning theories move from inter-subjective values to shared values that are based on normative ethical judgements. Communicative and collaborative planning theorists thus begin their arguments with a recognition of discursive spaces that are subjectively constructed before shifting to the search for *better* communicative processes and actions in a scaled-up public realm. Here, in this scaled-up public realm, members of a group no longer orientate their actions towards subjective concerns. Rather, ‘actions are oriented to common values’ (Habermas, 1984: 85). Habermasian procedural discourse ethics thus combines elements of inter-subjectivity and abstract universal ethics for the ultimate purpose of establishing common values that may lead to better processes of communication and actions, while the *nature* and *meaning* of ‘better’ processes and actions remain subsumed within a normative understanding of ethical theories.

An alternative approach aimed at debunking universal ethical prescriptions rests in ‘the internal workings of the ethical community itself’ (Bridge, 2000: 524; see Figure 1). From this communitarian standpoint, ethical norms are viewed as situated in linguistic and cultural practices, which are passed between generations. Such a grounded understanding of ethics serves as a counter to the abstract disembodiedness of universal ethics (McIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1992; Walzner, 1983). However, since communitarian ethics are founded on intra-community loyalties, such positions subscribe to relativist conceptualisations of values that are incommensurable and irreconcilable between different cultures (Bridge, 2000). For this reason, Young (1990) maintains that communitarian ethics are totalising concepts that ignore difference beyond the boundary of a community. Nevertheless, communitarianism has had some influence on urban theories, in particular on Camillo Sitte’s work which was revered by reformers like Lewis Mumford (Schorske, 1981). But much of this work predates postcolonial critiques of totalising concepts.

By contrast, the recognition and celebration of difference are central to multi- and inter-cultural planning theories. Sandercock (1998), for example, calls for a more ‘inclusive democracy [of] heterogeneous publics’ (p. 30). Accompanying ethical values for the fulfilment of heterogeneous publics might then be understood from a Levinian conceptualisation of inter-subjectivity that is founded on a moral agent’s unconditional responsibility towards an Other (Bridge, 2000; see Figure 1). However, ethical responsibilities towards others require ‘a move from proximity to infinity’ (Bridge, 2000: 526), where ‘proximity’ is based on inter-subjective and situated ethics, whereas ‘infinity’ is based on a ‘higher realm of ethical conduct’ (Lash, 1996: 102). Thus, in the same way that Habermas is able to move from the subjective to the universal, Levinas is able to move from the inter-subjective to the infinite. And in both cases, value-based judgements

<i>Ethical system</i>	<b>Liberal-individualist</b>	<b>Habermasian</b>	<b>Communitarian</b>	<b>Postmodern</b>
<i>ethical scope</i>	strong universal	weak universal	situated	difference particularity
<i>ethical prescriptions</i>	abstract	abstract intersubjective	communally grounded	inter-subjectively grounded
<i>conception of space</i>	abstract space	public space	community/ local space	corporeal intimate space

**Figure 1.** *An Ethical Map* (after Bridge, 2000: 519).

involve, by and large, normative ethical concerns. An abridged version of Gary Bridge’s (2000) ‘ethical map’ (p. 519) provides a useful summary of the preceding arguments.

Regardless, then, of scholars’ critique of the tendency in planning to derive ethical principles from ‘a universal set of deontological values’ (Watson, 2006: 46), concerns pertaining to planning values remain, for the most part, normative ethical concerns. This is not to suggest that such concerns are misguided. Rather, if scholars based in Africa (or elsewhere) are asked to seek ‘new moral philosophical sources to inform [their] thinking’ (Watson, 2006: 46), perhaps a starting point for such a search is from a meta-ethical position before arriving at normative judgements. But rather than engaging with meta-ethical questions, some scholars are quick to assume that such engagements might lead us down a relativist path that ‘derails a search for a common good’ (Campbell and Marshall, 1999: 474). For us, local experience suggests that we also need to ask: what, precisely, is the *nature* and *meaning* of ‘a common good’ in a situated context? We now turn to our engagement with meta-ethical questions, albeit a somewhat unsophisticated engagement, as the value of asking meta-ethical questions only arose during critical reflection sessions that took place after the ‘completion’ of our project.

**Grappling with meta-ethical concerns in a situated context**

Deepening socio-spatial inequalities, global economic crises and ongoing political turbulence, in addition to rapid urbanisation and growing informality, all challenge dominant imaginaries in and of the African urban context. ‘But which imaginaries will replace previous ones? And what kinds of intellectual reference points will guide us through transitions?’ (Wetzstein, 2012: 560) These are precisely the kinds of questions that prompt many African planning scholars to argue for different theoretical imaginaries than those derived from the global North alone (Appiah, 2006; Harrison, 2006; Kemete, 2010; Khalifa, 2011; Onyebueke and Ezeadichie, 2011; Parnell et al., 2009; Pieterse, 2010; Watson, 2006). And for many, a useful starting point involves grappling with *how* we might come to know ‘the African urban’ (epistemology). Being able to identify and name ‘the African urban’ as something different – albeit ‘ordinary’ (Robinson, 2006) and intrinsically linked to global economies – also allows them to question contemporary

planning values. In fact, Parnell et al. (2009) argue in favour of 'making the values of planning contextually relevant to our location in Africa' (p. 235). However, they go on to suggest that 'there is scope for the reaffirmation of the fundamental values that underpin planning' (Parnell et al., 2009). But whether 'contextually relevant' values are necessarily the same as, or compatible with, planning's 'fundamental' values is an issue that remains unquestioned. Rather, for Parnell et al. (2009), concerns pertaining to planning values are normative ethical concerns. Their focus is thus aimed at how we *should* plan in order to improve urban conditions in Africa. And, for them, we *should* facilitate 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice':

Planners do not alter the fundamental relations of society, but they may be able to stimulate particular growth paths, mitigate disasters, [and] identify how to redistribute resources to ensure greater equity and socio-spatial justice. (Parnell et al., 2009: 235)

Yet, what precisely is the *nature* and *meaning* of 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice' in a situated context? How might we know whether our planning-based interpretations of 'equity' and 'justice' are *better* than the interpretations made by others? And, how do subjective understandings of 'equity' and 'justice' vary in a specific context? Reflections from our case example suggest a few responses to these meta-ethical questions.

Starting from a naive assumption that all participants of a community–university partnership shared the same understanding of 'equity' and 'socio-spatial justice', we agreed to engage in an in situ upgrading project with community leaders and residents from two Cape Town–based informal settlements. Specifically, this project was led by community leaders and residents, and the role of the university partner was to assist residents in legitimising their 'rights to the city' by embracing values of equity and justice.

The two adjacent settlements in question are known as Barcelona and Europe. Both settlements are located in Gugulethu: a former apartheid-era Black Township that was laid out in the 1960s to function solely as a segregated dormitory settlement. Regardless of apartheid planning, both settlements are relatively centrally located. In total, 14,692 residents live in Barcelona and Europe, but only 32% of the working-age population is employed in the formal sector (Community Organization Resource Centre (CORC), 2010). The City of Cape Town is the official owner of the land, and, significantly, all of the shacks that comprise Barcelona and Europe are constructed on top of a former waste disposal site that was used by the municipality for the disposal of solid waste between 1956 and 1987. In 1987, the landfill site was closed by the municipality, but the site was neither rehabilitated nor sealed (ARG Design, 2007). As a result, the entire site is contaminated by methane, carbon dioxide and other noxious gases. Contaminants, in turn, are leaching into the Cape Flats Aquifer (ARG Design, 2007). Despite these environmental constraints, most residents have lived here since the early 1990s, albeit informally and without adequate public infrastructure and social services. Nevertheless, residents' main priority is to obtain security of tenure so that they may continue to live in Barcelona and Europe without the fear of being evicted from the land by the City Council.

We began our collaborative project from a standpoint that tenure insecurity reproduces spatial and socio-economic inequalities and injustices. We thus hoped to develop

practical solutions to these inequalities and injustices by scrutinising the South African legislation for different tenure options available to informal settlement residents. Despite identifying such options, community leaders and residents remained convinced that threats to health and safety from methane and other noxious gases were not serious. From their standpoint, residents had lived in Barcelona and Europe for more than 20 years, and there was no visible evidence of a negative impact on their health as a result of contaminants. Community leaders thus maintained that these threats were little more than a political ploy used by the municipality to justify the eviction and relocation of residents to still undetermined sites.<sup>8</sup> However, our research confirmed the presence of contaminants that are not only a threat to residents' health and safety but also a threat to the City's future water source. In fact, we discovered that the Cape Flats Aquifer could potentially provide 15% of the Cape Metropolitan Area's future water needs, which is significant in a water-scarce context.

Of further concern, our conservative calculations suggest that it will cost at least US\$66 million to rehabilitate the land before suitable planning interventions can take place in Barcelona and Europe. And since the City of Cape Town owns the land, it needs to finance these costs. Our calculations also suggest that in order for the City to recuperate rehabilitation costs, it might take the decision to raise and capture the market-based value of the land by changing the land-use regulations of the site (which is conceivable as the site is well located). Higher land values and amended regulations might, in turn, negate possibilities of allocating the site for affordable housing or for securing current residents' tenure to remain on the land. For the residents, such findings fail to yield more equitable and spatially just outcomes for their future in Barcelona and Europe. At best, they could expect a temporary relocation to allow for the rehabilitation of the land or, at worst, a permanent relocation to unknown sites that, in all likelihood, will be scattered throughout the larger metropolitan area due to the difficulty of identifying a site that can accommodate all 14,692 residents. However, temporary relocation practices in South Africa rarely result in residents returning to the land they originally occupied (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Community leaders and residents therefore request that the university partner ignore the issue of underlying contaminants, as well as the issue of contaminants entering a future water source.

This 'uncomfortable knowledge' (Flyvbjerg, 2013) poses an ethical conundrum between addressing the future needs of the wider metropolitan population and addressing the current, but urgent, needs of residents who are trying to eke out a living 'in a context where social and spatial inequalities are extreme and are easily exacerbated by planning decisions' (Watson, 2013: 168).<sup>9</sup> Uncomfortable knowledge also spotlights *how* subjective understandings of 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice' vary in a situated context. From our planning-based understanding, a *better* outcome includes rehabilitating the Cape Flats Aquifer while simultaneously accommodating residents as best as we can. By contrast, a *better* outcome from residents' standpoints entails in situ upgrading with as little disruption to their everyday survival mechanisms. The impact of such differences on planning outcomes 'can be underestimated, [because] planners assume a shared rationality where it does not exist' (Watson, 2003: 403).

Accommodating residents 'as best as we can' included identifying alternative sites throughout the metropolitan area for the possible and permanent relocation of residents.



But residents were deeply resistant to these explorations since the only power they possess over the state is vested in the fact that they have occupied the land for more than 20 years.<sup>10</sup> Rather than relinquish this power by moving from the land, they preferred, but remained disheartened by, other development options that accounted for more piecemeal, but less effective, land rehabilitation efforts. These options necessitated the temporary relocation of groups of households to other areas within the already overcrowded Barcelona and Europe settlements so that vacated land portions could be rehabilitated incrementally over a longer timeframe.

Relocating and reconstructing shacks inevitably curtail the amount of time available 'to find a job' (interview, community leader, May 2011), and all relocations and reconstructions – including those that take place within informal settlements – are subject to municipal approvals that incur additional time delays and costs. These physically, economically and emotionally taxing efforts also delay residents' plans to initiate incremental processes of constructing more permanent houses. All-in-all, rather than enabling 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice' for the residents of Barcelona and Europe, our research findings are creating additional anxieties among residents. These anxieties stem from the anticipated disruption to their current and future livelihood strategies. Thus, for the residents of Barcelona and Europe, the *nature* and *meaning* of 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice' entail: the right to remain on the land that they have occupied for more than 20 years, the right to establish security of tenure on this land, and the right to incrementally upgrade their homes by building permanent houses on the sites where their shacks are currently located. By contrast, the *nature* and *meaning* of 'equity' and 'justice' from the City Council's utilitarian standpoint concern protecting residents from health and safety risks, in addition to protecting the region's future water source. Furthermore, state-led evictions or relocation efforts are often justified on the principle of safeguarding 'a common good' that tends to be defined by most local authorities in liberal democratic contexts as 'a common good' for rates-paying citizens. And since the residents of Barcelona and Europe live informally on a portion of land that is contaminating a future water source, their right to remain on the land is nullified by a utilitarian understanding of 'a common good'. Finally, the university's ethical standpoint is shaped by a desire to reveal and work through 'uncomfortable knowledge', as opposed to ignoring it, while respecting residents' subjective interpretations of 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice'.

Knowing that constraints to securing tenure are not merely political constraints but rather uncontrollable environmental constraints became a major source of contestation among community leaders (interviews, leaders, June 2011). As a consequence, the community leaders who opted to persuade the City to rehabilitate the land for future upgrading interventions were deposed from their leadership positions by other leaders and residents who were fearful of losing their right to occupy the land (interview, leader, May 2012). The new leadership continued to deny and dismiss the 'uncomfortable knowledge' derived from our project findings. Varying understandings of the *nature* and *meaning* of equity and justice in planning practice produced an impasse where no planning decisions or actions regarding the future of Barcelona and Europe could take place because it was difficult to justify one group's subjective claims for equity and justice as being *better* or more appropriate than another group's claims. Furthermore, no 'common



good' was established, despite an explicit adoption of 'fundamental' planning values such as equity and justice.

While it might be argued that there is 'nothing particularly new' about conflicting interpretations of broad ethical concepts or that power shapes rationality, the decisions made by the various participants of the project have significant consequences for the residents of Barcelona and Europe. Indeed, some community leaders lost their status as leaders simply because of their involvement in a project that prompted conflicting interpretations and outcomes of ethical concepts. Ethical principles derived from rational utilitarianism fail to provide any indication of what a better course of action would (or *should*) be in Barcelona and Europe. This is then a case that calls for brave planning efforts, but with an astute awareness of the implications of the subjective *nature* and *meaning* of the ethical values we adopt when we hope to intervene at the interface of knowledge and action.

## Concluding remarks

We propose that epistemological standpoints shape – and are shaped by – ethical principles and that *epistemologies of action* are constantly changing. We also propose that while many contemporary planning theories are influenced by post-structural and postcolonial epistemologies that recognise the value of subjective and place-based knowledge, work on planning ethics tends to retain a focus on normative ethical theories.<sup>11</sup> This focus precludes further explorations of the *nature* and *meaning* of adopted ethical values. The Barcelona and Europe case example, however, foregrounds some of the subjective interpretations of value-based positions, including residents' communitarian ethics, a municipality's protectionist and utilitarian ethics and a university's ethics of seeking some response to 'uncomfortable knowledge'. Engaging with meta-ethical questions then becomes relevant if we hope to understand how and why ethical meanings differ in practice and if we hope to explain how competing understandings of values are in-themselves embroiled in power relations that impact planning outcomes. From this perspective, keeping concepts such as 'equity' and 'justice' as relatively undefined ethical principles obscures unequal power relations and negates opportunities to justify the validity of our normative ethical claims.

However, rather than engage with meta-ethical questions, most scholars' ongoing search for *theories from the global South* remains rooted in a quest to develop alternative epistemological standpoints alone:

In learning our craft, we need to understand the various epistemological dimensions of the overall knowledge project that has to simultaneously provincialize western-centred urban theories while addressing the imperative to purpose. (Pieterse, 2012: 26)

'Western-centred' epistemological positions are thus identified as necessitating change, but similar assertions are not asked of normative planning ethics, because 'fundamental' planning values are deemed to be known and shared from the outset. Few would disagree with Watson's (2003) claim that 'planning is fundamentally an ethical activity, as it raises questions about what should be done, for whom and by whom, and with what benefits and losses' (p. 404). Yet, if an impartial and universal rationality is rejected as an

epistemological basis for 'the African urban', why then do we continue to frame our actions within values that are assumed to be known and shared from the outset?

A more critical engagement with the discursive *nature* and *meaning* of the value-based statements, attitudes and judgements embedded within planning theory and practice may result in 'genuinely new ways of thinking about the world, and new ways of actually doing the politics of the world' (Merriman et al., 2012: 12). Meta-ethical explorations seek to examine the specific nature and histories of ethical principles and how we might come to know our own and other actors' value-based judgements before deciding on how we *should* plan. By ignoring such explorations, we may serve only to undermine our capacity to develop truly innovative and practical responses to identified problems in situated contexts.

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## Notes

1. The phrase 'planning to change the world' is drawn from Heather Campbell's (2012b) publication in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*.
2. It should, however, be noted that 'subjective interpretations' are not the only focus of meta-ethical theories (cf. section 'Exploring different meta-ethical positions' of this article).
3. While cognitive approaches are capable of evaluating moral statements as being either true or false, it is important to note that 'true' or 'false' values are not the same as 'right' or 'wrong' values. The idea that values are 'right' or 'wrong' concerns normative ethical theories.
4. This may be said despite the fact that the planning profession has various intellectual roots, including the British empiricist tradition of philosophy; the positivist philosophy of August Comte; the schools of pragmatism of Pierce, James and later Dewey and the sociological thought of Durkheim and Weber (see Friedmann, 1987).
5. Aspects of social contract theories remain, under various guises, in some contemporary planning theories.
6. The pursuit of selfish interests alone is also known, in various texts on ethical philosophy, as 'the original ethical position'.
7. What 'ought to be done' was also framed by the historicism of classical urban utopianism and the popular ideas of the social reform tradition that was active at the time (Freestone, 2000).
8. In South Africa, informal settlement dwellers are usually relocated by the state to the urban fringe where land values are cheaper, but where transportation costs for residents are higher and where livelihood strategies are often more difficult to pursue (Huchzermeyer, 2011).
9. Our research findings also pose an epistemological conundrum since we embrace theories of 'planning for social transformation' that focus on the needs of poor and marginalised residents, as opposed to 'common good' needs that are rooted in utilitarian theories.
10. The Prevention of Illegal Eviction from an Unlawful Occupation of Land Act (PIE Act 19 of 1998) safeguards against 'the eviction of unlawful occupiers living on both privately and

publicly owned land' (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1998: 3). This Act applies to anyone who occupies land without express consent, and, as such, it provides informal settlement to residents with rights to remain on occupied land. In the case of occupying land which is contaminated, exceptions to this right apply on grounds of health and safety risks.

11. To be clear, this is not to infer a synonymy between 'normative' and 'universal'.

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