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**“Coffins on Wheels”: A bioethical study of work conditions, driver behavior and road safety in the Johannesburg minibus taxi industry**

Lee Randall, Johannesburg, April 2019

Road traffic injuries and deaths (RTID) are a global public health crisis affecting the ethically charged road traffic system, and disproportionately affect the poor. By world standards South Africa has extremely high crash rates and in many respects is failing to apply road safety best practice, despite being a signatory to the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020. In the economic hub of Johannesburg the minibus taxi industry (MTI) is a dominant mode of paratransit (informal public transport) which offers flexible and affordable services and helps reduce the social divide caused by the lingering spatial realities of apartheid. It is also a source of economic empowerment and much-needed jobs – however, as with paratransit systems elsewhere, unsafe driving is common and many of the taxis are elderly or defective. Frequent MTI crashes contribute to Johannesburg’s road deaths being more than triple the international city average. Members of the public tend to vilify MTI drivers and ascribe a high degree of moral responsibility to them, but this intuitive reasoning seems to disregard their work conditions and how these affect their driving behavior. It also fails to take into account the South African road safety status quo and the possibility that MTI drivers are akin to an indicator species in relation to the ills of our road traffic system.

Prevailing views of road safety are shaped by the Vision Zero philosophy and the Safe System approach, which assign responsibilities both to road users and to system designers. In line with this, my study addresses the question of what moral responsibilities should be ascribed, and to whom, in relation to reducing RTID in the Johannesburg MTI. I answer this bioethical question by means of a dual descriptive-normative inquiry. My descriptive inquiry is based on my mixed-methods empirical research with drivers, aimed at addressing the dearth of knowledge of their work conditions and tapping their views on crash causation and road safety responsibilities. My results, viewed against the backdrop of road safety best practice, lead me to label the operating principles of the Johannesburg MTI ‘contra-constitutional’ due to their violating the drivers’ labour rights as well as the human rights of drivers, passengers and other road users alike. I also analyse the South

African road safety situation with regards to road safety best practice and comparative information from three groups of reference countries: the BRICS, our African neighbours (and two other African countries with similar paratransit), and several aspirational countries with very low RTID. This analysis leads me to develop the term ‘crashogenic’ to describe our road traffic system.

My normative inquiry draws on arguments which have been made by other authors focusing on moral considerations in relation to road safety. It applies Nihlen Falquist’s moral responsibility ascription framework – developed with regards to Sweden’s Vision Zero policy – in a novel fashion, employing graphical representation in addition to narrative reasoning. Thus, I use her three categories of *blame responsibility*, *causal responsibility* and *forward-looking responsibility* and ascribe specific moral responsibilities to identified rolepayers, with a view to reducing RTID in the Johannesburg MTI.

My study makes an original contribution to the bioethical debate on road safety, with a unique South African perspective. It also extends the existing knowledge base regarding drivers’ work conditions in paratransit systems.