This paper formed the basis of Hugh Mackay's presentation.
It was first published by The Sydney Institute in the Sydney Papers, 2004

Right & Wrong: How to decide for yourself

Hugh Mackay

Some of you must be wondering who would be mad enough - or arrogant enough - to write a book called *Right & Wrong.* In fact, the subtitle, *How to decide for yourself,* contains the key to the meaning of this book. It is not my personal catalogue of good or evil, or my prescriptions about how anyone should act. It is not a judgemental book: quite the reverse.

Right & Wrong: How to decide for yourself was written in response to a recurring theme in my social research: the sense that Australians are finding increasing difficulty in making confident moral decisions. Parents report that they are finding it harder to establish a basis for the moral instruction of their children; people complain that they don't have the same sense of "shared values" in their neighbourhoods and communities as they once did: there is a growing feeling of hesitancy in our approach to moral dilemmas.

This has become such a persistent theme that I can only assume it is a reflection of reality. I assume that people are, indeed, experiencing more difficulty on their pathway towards moral enlightenment. The question is, why might this be so? I think there are at least three possible explanations.

First, there has been a loss of respect for the moral authority of institutions - especially the church. Church attendance in Australia has plummeted: we're now down to about 15 percent of Australians who attend church regularly and, although church attendance is by no means the only indicator of respect for the institutional church as a moral authority, it is perhaps a symptom. (For a start, many Australians now believe that some branches of the church have enough moral issues of their own to contend with, without suggesting how the rest of us might live.)

But it's not only the church: political, judicial, commercial/corporate and cultural institutions are all suffering from a decline in public trust (at least partly because intuitional dirty linen is now so commonly exposed to the glare of media publicity).

The second factor contributing to a loss of moral clarity arises from the connection between the sense of community and the sense of morality. If you believe, as I do, that the moral sense is a social sense - that is, we gradually develop a moral

framework out of our experience of learning how to rub along with other people - then it would follow that if communities are less stable and less cohesive than they used to be, moral confidence would be a casualty of that: feeling as if we are members of a community is the prerequisite for accepting some responsibility for each other's well-being.

The evidence suggests that Australian communities are, indeed, less stable and less cohesive than they used to be. The increasing ethnic diversity, the high rate of marriage breakdown, the plummeting birth rate, our shrinking households and the mobility of the population all contribute to this sense of neighbourhoods being more fluid, more transient and perhaps more "wounded" than in the past. The widening gap between wealth and poverty in Australia is also threatening our confidence in the idea of an egalitarian, broadly middle-class society in which we all share roughly the same values and the same way of life.

When about 45 percent of contemporary marriages end in divorce, this is a hugely destabilising factor in community life. The plummeting birth rate, similarly, takes its toll: in most neighbourhoods, children act as a kind of social lubricant, facilitating social connections between their families. As the birth rate continues to fall, that "lubricant" is in shorter supply.

The third factor that might be dulling our moral clarity is the fact that we seem to live in a more complex moral universe than the one inhabited by our parents and grandparents. There are simply more moral dilemmas facing us and more moral choices to be made. A sexually permissive society raises new questions about sexual behaviour. A pervasive drug culture – especially among the under 30's - raises questions about illicit drug use never imagined by previous generations. With such a high rate of marriage breakdown and re-partnering, we are facing more complex decisions about entering and leaving relationships, and all of them are charged with moral valency because they have implications for the wellbeing of others.

But it doesn't stop there. The field of biotechnology is constantly bringing us news of ethical dilemmas from the frontiers of science. Until the controversy about embryonic stem cell research erupted last year, who would have imagined that Australians would have been engaged in a debate about arcane biotechnology, with scientists, doctors, theologians, lawyers and politicians all having their say and members of the general public forming an opinion about a matter which might previously have been regarded as none of their business.

And what will we say about human cloning? Once cloning technology is perfected, how will we respond if our children or grandchildren decide, for whatever reason, that they wish to reproduce themselves via cloning, rather than via conventional sexual reproduction. These things seem remarkably controversial now - but so did contraception, once, and so did the process of in-vitro fertilisation (though the first IVF baby, Louise Brown, has now passed her 25th birthday).

Warfare, too, is subject to new moral arguments. You will recall that we were invited to regard the invasion of Afghanistan as not being a conventional military invasion leading to a conventional war: it was to be regarded as part of the "war on terror" which did not follow the old rules. It was about the pursuit of Osama Bin Laden and the overthrow of the regime said to be shielding him. Since the moral framework was new, the US announced that the Geneva conventions did not apply, so prisoners taken in this new kind of war were not to be regarded as 'prisoners of war', in the traditional sense – hence, Guantanamo Bay.

When you consider the loss of institutional moral authority, increasing fragmentation and transience of communities that once sustained our moral code and the increasing complexity of our moral universe, it is perhaps not surprising that so many people report a loss of confidence in their approach to making moral choices and ethical decisions.

So how should we respond to this loss of confidence? It is already clear that Australians are responding in three ways.

First, there is the **pro-regulation lobby** urging us to remove as many decisions as possible from the province of the individual conscience by passing laws and creating rules and regulations that will control people's behaviour. We are already accustomed to the idea of anti-vilification laws having invaded an area we once thought was a matter of individual moral responsibility. Similarly, we have taken the question of smoking behaviour out of the hands of smokers and passed laws to control their behaviour. In everything from corporate governance to advertising directed at children, the mood favours more control, more regulation. It is as if we are saying: 'we can't trust each other to make sensitive moral choices so we'll hand such matters over to the legislators.' I understand there is even some discussion about the possibility of legislation to define the role and responsibilities of parents.

This is a counter-productive approach. Anyone who has raised children knows that if you simply produce a long list of prohibited activities, the children become

preoccupied with loopholes or else they decide that "if it's not on the list, it must be okay". So you have to keep lengthening the list. There is some risk that Australian society is heading in the same direction and it's a trend I believe we should resist. For a start, there is all the difference in the world between morality (which is about fairness and freedom to choose) and law (which is about justice and obedience).

A second, more enlightened approach to our present difficulty comes from those who are saying that if our sense of morality depends on our sense of connectedness with communities, then we need to do more in the area of **community development.** Anyone involved in the development of community life is, in effect, making a significant contribution to our moral health as well as our social and emotional health. Urban planners, adult educators, organisers of discussion groups, book clubs, choirs... anyone who is bringing us together is likely to increase our willingness to accept responsibility for each other's wellbeing.

But the third way is the best way: ultimately, we have to acknowledge that **the responsibility for the moral health of our society rests on each of us, individually.** We have to *want* to do the right thing; we have to *want* to make better and fairer moral choices; we have to *want* to offer a better moral example to our children, our neighbours, our colleagues and friends. In other words, it is ultimately up to us to decide for ourselves what's right and wrong – even though we know the process will be influenced by the context in which we are making these decisions.

Once we start thinking about how to decide what's right and wrong, any number of people are available to advise us. Even Ernest Hemingway – not normally regarded as a moral authority – once delivered himself of the opinion that "what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after"... which is no help at all, of course, because you won't know until after.

The wonderfully cynical US journalist and commentator, HL Mencken, once observed that "conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking", which seems wide of the mark! It's not unusual to hear politicians and business leaders talking about the sobering effect of public exposure on their decision making, but the reasoning is flawed: if we are only refraining from doing something because public exposure would humiliate us, this is very different from avoiding it because it is wrong. I argue throughout the book that we should be doing the right thing for no reason other than that we know it is the right thing to do.

My favourite quote about ethics comes from the field of business ethics which is perhaps the most significant chapter in my new book. It is clear that many Australians – especially young people – feel they are being asked to cut moral corners at work: it is now widely accepted that if there is a collision between commercial imperatives and moral imperatives in the workplace, the commercial imperatives will prevail. If there is tension between the bottom line and the social conscience, the bottom line will win. It is becoming apparent that, in a climate of harsh "economic rationalism", many people feel as though they operate in something of a moral vacuum at work, even if they are quite clear about the moral framework for their personal lives.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers published a survey last year in which they found that 47 percent of Australian businesses had experienced corporate crime in the previous two years: that is, crime committed against the organisation by its own employees. Such crime ranges from the kind of corruption that lead to the collapse of HIH, or the infamous King Brothers' bus company which apparently had 300 phantom Mercedes buses running around country NSW (they didn't exist, but they were fully financed by a bank), all the way down to people who are fiddling the petty cash or manipulating a computer payroll for there own advantage.

If there is as much corporate *crime* as that, what does that say about the climate for ethical decision-making? US research has suggested that moral issues do not get much of an airing in the workplace, where many managers suffer from so called "moral muteness" - believing that even if they are acting out of strong ethical principles, they shouldn't say so lest they be regarded as wimps or bleeding hearts. Thus, many people experience the workplace – and the business of management – as "morally neutral", which is why Justice Neville Owen, in his report on the Royal Commission into the collapse of HIH, lamented the fact that 'this seems to have been an organisation in which no one ever asked the question "Is this right?".'

Clearly, it is time to put ethics on the business agenda and to encourage moral reflection among our employees. Occupational Health and Safety now has a permanent place on the agenda of most business meetings: isn't it time for "ethical issues" to become similarly ubiquitous?

But to return to the quote I was about to read you. It comes from one of my favourite philosophers, Groucho Marx: "The secret of success in business is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made." (It was, Groucho, of course, who also said, "Those are my principles! If you don't like them… I have some others.")

Needless to say, that is not the basis on which I have written *Right & Wrong: How to decide for your self.* Rather, I'm suggesting that each of us might strive to achieve "moral mindfulness". Shamelessly borrowed from Buddhism, "moral mindfulness" refers to a state of mind in which our moral antennae are constantly twitching, in which we are constantly reflecting on the moral lessons our experience has taught us and visualising the possible outcomes of actions we are contemplating taking. "Moral mindfulness" is an amalgam of meditation, contemplation and introspection.

Many of us have developed intuitive tests for encouraging this state of mind. The Rotary organisation, for example, has a four-way test: "Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?" That's a good test because it doesn't set out rules we have to follow; it enunciates principles we can embrace and apply in any setting.

Some parents encourage their moral mindfulness by imagining whether they would want to encourage their own children to behave in the same way as they behave.

Another good test to encourage moral mindfulness is to ask "what's in this for me?" That's a question we normally ask in a spirit of self-interest, but it can also be asked in a spirit of moral sensitivity: is there so much in this for me that it is blinding me to the moral issues involved?

All such tests are useful, but I believe we need more. Let me offer you a metaphor, borrowed from Martin Heidegger, to illustrate what I mean.

In an autobiographical essay, Heidegger was describing the experience of walking along a path on the outskirts of the village where he had grown up in rural Germany, and suddenly coming upon a magnificent oak tree on the edge of a wood. Standing and contemplating this oak, Heidegger noted how it was both "open to the sky and rooted to the earth". This led him to write: "everything real and true only prospers if mankind fulfils at the same time the two conditions of being ready for the demands of highest heaven and of being safe in the shelter of the fruitful earth."

That is a poetic way of saying the very thing that lies at the heart of my new book. I am suggesting that, in order to approach the state of moral mindfulness, we need to pursue two quite different lines of questioning. First, the classic utilitarian questions about consequences: What will be the effect of this action on other people? Will it do more good than harm? Will it produce the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number? Will it produce more pleasure than pain? Or, more testingly, will it produce *any* harm? *Any* pain?

These questions are important because they "root us to the earth". They are the questions about the consequences, implications and effects of our behaviour on the community to which we belong.

But I believe the utilitarian questions are not enough. Moral mindfulness demands that we also ask questions that "open us to the sky" - idealist questions about goodness, virtue and personal integrity. These are not questions about consequences for others, but for ourselves: we can easily imagine an action that has no negative consequences for others but still tarnish our own sense of our own integrity. So we need to ask: Is this action in harmony with my idea of virtue? Will this action bring me closer to my ideal of goodness? Will I admire myself – is this the way I aspire to behave? Is this the action of the kind of person I want to become?

So if we pursue both the *utilitarian* and the *idealist* line of questioning, we will give ourselves the best possible chance of achieving the state of moral mindfulness...of achieving moral confidence, whether we are deciding how to treat asylum-seekers, or whether to invade another country, or whether to pass on a juicy piece of gossip, or whether to leave an unsatisfactory relationship, or whether to assist a terminally ill person in great pain and distress to a premature but comfortable death. Whatever the circumstances, we need to consider both the consequences for others and the implications for our own sense of our own integrity.

But will this dual line of questioning guarantee that we will always know what is right for us? Will it guarantee the moral clarity for which we yearn? Unhappily, not always. We will still sometimes find ourselves having to choose the lesser of two evils. We will still find ourselves existing in a state of moral chaos in which we will sometimes know what's right but not do it – perhaps because we are swept by more powerful passions of one kind or another.

We may draw some comfort from the words recently written by Simon Blackburn, Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, in his book *Being Good:* "If we are careful, and mature, and imaginative, and fair, and nice, and lucky, the moral mirror in which we gaze at ourselves may not show us saints - but it need not show us monsters, either." Perhaps that's as high as we can aspire. When we look in the moral mirror we don't want to see monsters and we may never see saints, but presumably we would like to see someone who is striving towards the ideal of moral mindfulness.

I suggested at the outset that *Right & Wrong* is neither a prescriptive nor a judgemental book. It is not my personal catalogue of rights and wrongs, but it does draw some conclusions. Like most people who study the matter, I conclude that when we seek our own happiness at the expense of someone else's, we'll generally fail. I conclude that moralising usually does more harm than the behaviour it criticises: when we make judgements about other people's behaviour, we are usually adding more to the sum of human unhappiness than they are.

I conclude that lying can be justified under many circumstances. (For example, I don't think "that was a lovely evening" is a heinous crime, even if you were bored rigid, nor do I think I should tell the truth to a violent husband who is knocking at my door wanting to know the whereabouts of the battered wife I have concealed in my attic.) But I think we know where to draw the line with lying: lying is *always* wrong when it involves the exploitation of someone else for our own benefit.

The book also argues that the end rarely justifies the means and that every action undertaken on the way to a morally acceptable goal should itself be morally acceptable.

I want to conclude by reading the final paragraph of the book.

> Even when we share the same values and try to live in harmony with the same virtues we won't always agree with each other about what's right and wrong in particular cases. But wise moral decisions will always acknowledge our interdependency: our moral choices are ours alone, but they bind us to all those who will be affected by them. So deciding *for yourself* what's right and wrong does not mean deciding in *isolation*. Though we may sometimes feel like independent little boats bobbing about on the surface of some trackless ocean, we are actually more like the strands of a vast, evolving web. We depend on our connections with each other for our sense of identity, morality, emotional security and psychological-wellbeing; in that sense, we belong to each other.

That sense of interconnectedness is both the wellspring and the lifeblood of any moral code because it is the pre-requisite for accepting responsibility for each other's wellbeing.