

A Foundation for Living Ethically

Glenn Martin



Praise for A Foundation for Living Ethically

Fran Murrell, Consultant

I think you have done an amazing job. I liked the Q-and-A conversation format and the short chapters. It made it easier to understand and to see the critique/teasing out of the implications of the ideas. It covers a lot of ground and doesn't get bogged down in detail or in stodgy explanations of impenetrable philosophers.

Nikki Thompson, Coach/Consultant at Inner Circle Work

I thoroughly enjoyed it. The overall felt sense I had was that you had nailed it. I was left feeling curious, and I sense that I will have a subtle shift in my perception as a result. I loved how you highlighted personal choice as essential for humans and the need to have that linked with responsibility. I liked how you brought the different philosophical views into the conversation – Eastern and Western as well as different philosophical frameworks and ideologies. You had lots of lovely entry points to help the reader see how we all change, how context impacts on action, and how there is always an ecosystem in all things.

Elissa Farrow, Founder, About Your Transition

I feel honoured to have had the opportunity to read this book through. It was a good read and it is a contemporary topic. I like the session format and found the flow of conversation style mixed with theory or broader blocks to be a good balance. I think this is a massive achievement.

Dr Charmayne Highfield, Adjunct Faculty at Singapore Management University

I really enjoyed reading the book. It is written in an engaging way, and the conversational style should appeal across age ranges.

Nicolene Murdoch, CEO, The College, Western Sydney University

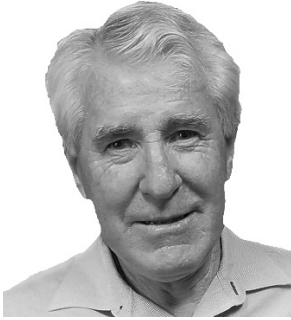
The questions the book asks are really powerful, linking ethics and values. It is a guide for an ethical life. I like the idea of a conversation.

Peter Le Breton, Associate Lecturer, Murdoch University

You have clearly put a lot of deep thought, care and study into your creation. The way you have structured the book—as a conversation between, say, an ethicist and a student—is likely to draw many readers to your work.

Audrey Lobo-Pulo, Founder, Phoensight

Thank you so much for sharing your book with me. I am still going through it, as it holds a wealth of information – and I'm absorbing it bit by bit. What I find fascinating in it, is in viewing it from an Artificial Intelligence perspective. The core of what you put forward is so relevant right now. Given what's happening with the 'surveillance state', machine learning and artificial intelligence, ethics today is more important than ever. And I think we're only just grasping it after the onset of perverse societal impacts...



Glenn Martin has been a teacher of human resources and business and professional ethics and he has written extensively on management, business ethics, employment law and training and development. He has been the editor of publications for professionals and an instructional designer for online learning in universities and commercial enterprises. He has been a high school teacher and a manager of community services organisations. He has also written many books – on ethics, family history, collections of poems and reflections on experience.

Glenn lives in Sydney, although he lived in the bush on the far north coast of New South Wales for two decades.

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G.P. Martin Publishing



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By Glenn Martin

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Preface

We live in an imperfect world, but we can bring ourselves to accept that. These are simply the conditions of life. What is more difficult to accept is when life seems to be unfair, and when unethical behaviour seems to go unchecked. People seem to “get away with it”. It can dent our own commitment to living ethically.

Then, when we hear what people have to say about ethics, it can make us wonder. They say different, contradictory things, or they say one thing and do another. Or, what they say doesn't really make things clear – it is confusing, and sometimes you think, deliberately so. They are being disingenuous. Or what they say is so simplistic – trite – that you know you could never apply it in practice. It would never help in a real situation.

On the other hand, some of what is said about ethics is self-righteous and doctrinaire. For these people, there are rules and they are rigid, and everything and everyone else is deemed to be wrong. There are no allowances for the complexities that life presents us with.

At the centre, however, is the idea that we are personally responsible for our conduct. We all know, from the bitter experiences of the twentieth century (particularly the Hitler years), that we cannot retreat behind the excuse that we were “just following orders”. Maybe temporarily we have to do that to survive, but it is no way to live.

Of course, we can give up. We can say it is impossible, or just too hard, to try to live ethically. What does that leave us with? It leaves us scrambling for all the things that ethics was making too hard for us, whatever that is – a job, success, popularity, happiness, money. A lot of things. But it is not a perfect world,

and any success we obtain this way might be fickle or transient. What then?

It is a conundrum, but the question remains: Is there a foundation for living ethically? The answer, as I see it, is “Yes!” And if that is so, the next question is “Are you ready to live up to it?”

A Foundation for Living Ethically invites you to take responsibility for your life. What is presented in this book are guiding principles for living, in all of the areas of your life: personal, social, work, business, relationships, and engaging with the natural world. It comes out of the idea that there are two complementary aspects of your self: the choices you make (and the actions that follow from those choices), and the kind of person you are becoming. We have to talk about both.

The book is written as a series of conversational sessions. The conversation is between two people: Glenn (me) and a person I am calling Prudence. She is an active listener who responds and comments. Sometimes she sees a different aspect to me, or wants to take things further. In each session, we are looking at a topic in ethics. I am presenting my explanations and Prudence is responding, as you might if you were talking with me directly.

Through the sessions, I am sketching out a broad foundation for living ethically, something to give you clarity and to strengthen you personally in the midst of all of the challenges the world presents you with. This is not to suggest that you can be perfect or superior to others, but it is to say that you can be clearer about your intentions and purposes, and therefore both more resolute and astute in your actions.

The sessions present a number of ethical principles that relate to the different aspects of you as a person – your reasoning mind, your emotions, your sense of justice, fairness and kindness, your spirit, and your deeper self (which some call the soul). I don’t think that the ethical principles, or values, that people often speak about – such as truth, peace, justice, fairness, respect,

kindness and compassion – are arbitrary. I think they are reflections of the different aspects of our nature as persons.

This approach means I don't think ethics can be reduced to a single rule or principle, such as "Tell the truth". As I have just suggested, there are generally several values at play, and we have to work through them actively in the different situations we encounter. How? We will talk about that.

The definition of ethics that I use is from Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), a Nobel Peace Prize winner, doctor, theologian and missionary who established and ran a hospital in Gabon (northern Africa) over many years. The definition is couched in terms of consideration for the well-being of others. I think this is a good place to start, and more helpful than many other definitions of ethics.

To get a taste of what the book covers, here are some of the questions addressed:

- Why be ethical?
- What is the relationship between ethics and success?
- between ethics and happiness?
- between ethics and stress?
- Why do people act unethically?
- What is conscience?
- Is the concept of character still relevant?
- What is virtue, and is it still relevant?
- What is the appropriate connection between ethics and needs?
- What part do the emotions play in ethics?

These questions will make you think of other questions too. That is what happened during the writing of the sessions. Hopefully the book addresses many of the questions you have about ethics, including questions that are not included above. One of the questions that came up was "Can you get better, or stronger, at behaving ethically, or in other words, can you develop ethically?"

I don't offer a simple yes/no answer to this, but Glenn and Prudence discuss how it is useful to talk about different levels of ethical development.

This book talks about a "foundation" for ethics because many things flow from it. With this foundation you can go on to talk about what ethics looks like in specific domains, such as ethics for engineers, doctors, architects, accountants – any profession. And you can talk about ethics in particular contexts, such as business, or in organisations, or in personal and social relationships.

In the business world, we could talk about how this foundation leads to social responsibility, or how it informs a healthy approach to artificial intelligence. And we could talk about where this leads us in addressing climate change in a committed, cooperative and effective way, at all levels of government and society.

You might ask, what is the nature of this foundation? Is it a theory? Is there proof for it? You will observe, as you read, that this book does not discuss "theories" of ethics. A theory suggests scientific methods and the promise of proof. I think that approach misunderstands the basic nature of ethics. There is no proof for any set of ethical propositions. As Schweitzer put it, humanity has to accept that objective reality (or nature) is morally neutral. Humans have to choose to create moral structures.¹

An ethical proposition is an assertion made by a person, group or society. Whether it counts for anything is a matter of whether other people are persuaded by it and agree to it collectively. For example, societies generally agree that murder is wrong.

If it is a personal matter, meaning, these are rules I will apply to myself and they only affect me, then there is no problem. I can choose to be a vegetarian. It only becomes a different question when others are involved. If I assert that everyone should be a vegetarian, then I need to persuade others to agree, and we will need to determine how the goal/rule is going to be achieved or

enforced. There is more to it than this, but Glenn and Prudence will talk about that.

I have provided endnotes and a bibliography, because Glenn and Prudence's conversations refer to a variety of writers and philosophers. I have tried not to be too indulgent with references, because that can end up being overwhelming. The idea has been simply to provide some places to start if you wish to follow up on what is said in this book.

Having said that, I don't claim to have represented other writers and philosophers accurately or comprehensively. Nor should I be construed as aligning with all the views of the people I have quoted. I am drawing on ideas that are in the public conversation and weaving them into my own account of ethics that I hope is helpful.

What I say about the book is that I hope the foundation for living ethically which is presented here is a plausible foundation for you. The root of the word "plausible" means "applause". I hope it persuades you, I hope it touches you, and I hope it inspires you to clap your hands together with joy and commit to living life ethically!

Session 1: How does a conversation about ethics start?

Prudence. We should talk about ethics.

Glenn. Why would we do that?

Prudence. Because it's a question that comes up.

Glenn. What kind of question is that?

Prudence. It's about the word "should". What do we mean when we use that word?

Glenn. It could mean more than one thing. Here's one example: "You should catch the bus if you want to get to work on time." But we also use the word in another way. Such as: "You should give the wallet back to the person who just dropped it and didn't notice."

Prudence. I can see that these are different, but how? Can you explain that?

Glenn. Let's say there are two things in life, competence and ethics. Competence is about the ability to get things done, and doing them, and ethics is about right and wrong.

Prudence. Okay, so you're saying that catching the bus is about competency, achieving the result of getting to work on time, and the wallet situation is about right and wrong.

Glenn. Yes. We should do this if we want to achieve that, or, we should do this because it's the right thing to do. Competency in the first case, or we could say competency and performance, and ethics in the second case.

Prudence. Okay, I accept that. So let's focus on ethics. Why should I be ethical?

Glenn. That's easy – because you expect other people to be ethical. It follows that you should be ethical yourself.

Prudence. Do I expect other people to be ethical?

Glenn. I think so. Whenever there is a big business scandal, people are very quick to see the ethics involved in it. No one seems to have any trouble. No one says, well, I just don't understand business.

Prudence. Can you give me an example?

Glenn. There are examples every day on the news, every day of every year. Let's take just one. In Australia in 2018 there was a Royal Commission into the behaviour of banks. One of the issues revealed was that there were banks engaging in "fees for no service".

The service was generally related to financial advice. The banks would entice customers into these relationships, then they would collect fees on an ongoing basis, but would not provide the advice, and indeed, never had any intention of providing the advice. For us ordinary mortals, this is a polite way of describing deceit, fraud and theft. No amount of fancy business talk can change this reality. It is a case where the ethics is quite simple.

Prudence. Okay, yes, I agree. If I were a customer of the bank, I would not want to be deceived and defrauded like that. So, yes, I suppose I do expect other people to be ethical.

Glenn. So it makes sense, then, that you should be ethical too.

Prudence. But often we are caught up in situations where people are not acting ethically, and it is hard for us to get out of those situations. We do not have the power, and we do not know what to do.

Glenn. Indeed, we have lots to talk about. However, to start with, do you know what ethics is? Or, to be more practical, when you are in a situation, can you tell what is ethical and what is not?

Prudence. When you put it to me directly like that, I think, yes, mostly I can tell if something is ethical or not. But then it gets confused, because it gets caught up in what everybody is doing. If I feel that something might be wrong, but everybody is doing it, how can I go against that? What they say, generally, is “Everybody does this”, so I think, “This is the way the world is” and I should just accept it and go along with it.

Glenn. This is what people would have been saying to each other at those banks. To make it harder for them to say no, they would have been collecting handsome commissions or bonuses from those “fees for no service” arrangements.

Prudence. We seem to have started on a dark note. Maybe I don’t want to talk about ethics. Maybe I can see it all too clearly, and it’s no use.

Glenn. Well, even if that’s true, it helps to know what you’re talking about. We could continue.

Prudence. Okay, but give me a reason – something, anything. Just knowing what you’re talking about is not very comforting if you are doomed anyway.

Glenn. Fair enough. Let me ask you a question. If you saw the person drop that wallet, would you pick it up and give it back to them?

Prudence. Yes, of course I would. It’s not mine. They own it. And maybe they are counting on the money and the other things in the wallet. And even if they weren’t, they would be hurt if I took the wallet, even if they don’t know me. They would know that someone stole their wallet. It would be a betrayal of them as a person; it would be wrong.

Glenn. How right you are. Yes, even if you are not known to each other. So we have to continue. Even in this difficult world, there is something at stake.

Prudence. Okay, so can we start at the beginning? What is ethics? Why do I seem to know it so well, but at the same time I feel like I don't know anything about it?

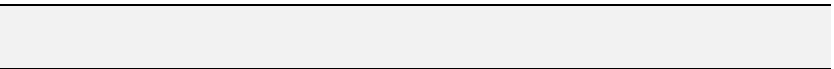
Glenn. Which question should I answer first? (laughing)

Prudence. Let me think. The last question is the more interesting one.

Glenn. Yes, it is. And the answer is not simple. It's a paradox. You have to learn to question yourself, and at the same time, you have to learn to trust yourself, because finally, you have to take responsibility for yourself and make decisions as best you can. You have to stand on the ground, and sometimes, by yourself.

Prudence. Yes, I hear that, but we will talk about ethics, won't we?

Glenn. Yes, we will.



END OF SAMPLE

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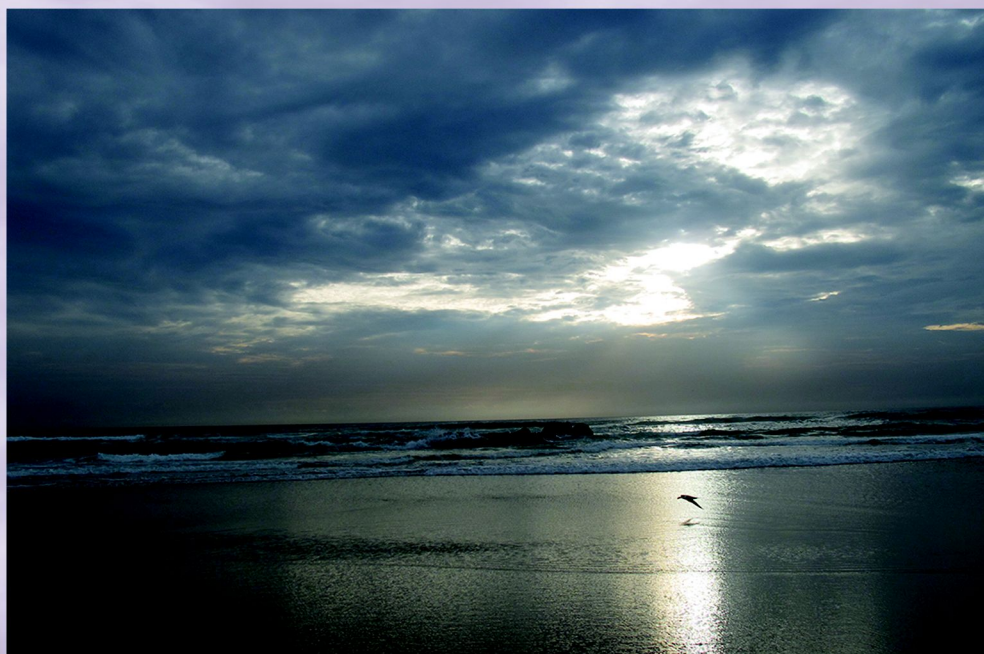
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Local histories

Places in the Bush: A History of Kyogle Shire (1988)

The Kyogle Public School Centenary Book (1995)



Today, many people seem to think they can reject ethics, and even think that success requires its rejection. Others think they can choose what ethical principles to accept or reject, because (they think) it is just personal and subjective. A lot of talk that relates to ethics is confused or confusing. In the face of this we might despair, or resort to scrambling for popularity, power and material success, knowing that our victory, should it occur, may be fickle and transient, and it will probably cost us personally.

In this book you will find a plausible foundation for living an ethical life, based on five core human values. It begins with the simple idea of ethics as having regard for the well-being of others.

This is not to suggest that you can be perfect, superior to others or care-free, but it is to say you can live ethically, and also that it is a worthwhile way to live.

Glenn Martin has been a teacher of business and professional ethics over many years, and he has written numerous books and articles on ethics and human values.



BOOKS

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