

The Little Book of Ethics

A Human Values Approach



Glenn Martin

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A human values approach

Ethics is a central part of our lives. It is as basic and pervasive as thinking and feeling. But dealing with ethical issues can leave us feeling confused, uncertain and even guilty without knowing why. *The Little Book of Ethics* introduces us to ethics through the lens of values, and offers us five core human values – honesty, peace, right action, love and insight. It shows how these values can be applied in the different domains of our lives, and relates these values to the aims of human life, where ethics is united with meaning and purpose.

People do not all see ethics from the same perspective. The human values approach in this book enables us to see why people talk about ethics differently, and how to establish our own foundation of values. The book explains the different orientations to ethics that we encounter among people, and relates them to laws and compliance, and to the quality of our relationships. It shows how we can develop our understanding of ethics so that it becomes the gateway to living with deep integrity, peace and strength.

Discussion of ethics can fall into a variety of traps. It can be simplistic, pious, doctrinaire, bombastic or quaintly philosophical. *The Little Book of Ethics* is simple in conception but sweeping in scope. It is offered as a practical handbook for establishing the grounds on which you can live a worthwhile life.

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Published 2011 by G.P. Martin Publishing

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Glenn Martin asserts his moral rights as the author of this book.

**National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Author: Martin, Glenn.

Title: The little book of ethics : a human values approach / Glenn Martin.

ISBN: 978 0 9804045 4 8 (pbk.)

Subjects: Ethics.
Values.

Dewey Number: 170

Book layout, design and photo by the author

Typeset in Garamond 12 pt

Printed by Lulu.com

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Preface

In writing this little book, my question was: can I say something simple but helpful about ethics? There are many books on ethics, offering a great variety of perspectives. My intent here is to offer a framework for thinking about ethics that can be used by both ordinary people and leaders, in their lives and at work. It does not require the reader to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs about God or the nature of the world. Mine is an experiential approach to life and human behaviour.

My envisaged audience is as wide as you can imagine. My aim is for the concepts in this book to have resonance for people everywhere, across all cultures, religions and societies. I believe the human values approach described here provides the foundation for a worthwhile life for individual persons, groups, organisations and societies.

I hope that any insight you gain from this approach will inspire and sustain you to live ethically. It is often said that the world is crying out for people and leaders whose lives are deeply rooted in moral principles, values and ethics, and who have regard for the well-being of others rather than grasping selfishly for their own gain.

Of course this has always been true; it is ancient wisdom. And it is possible for each of us today to be such a person or leader, whatever our situation. Indeed, being ethical, as you will see in this book, leads us on to the fulfilment of all that it is possible for us to be. The ethical life extends far beyond mere obedience to rules.

The Little Book of Ethics follows my book *Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace*, which was a more academic account of the concepts presented here. The latter book gives more depth on how this framework of concepts emerged.

Chapter 1: How to start talking about ethics

Although all stable societies rest firmly on a consensus of values, invariably the individuals in those societies prefer not to discuss those values, except in glittering generalities, not because they are unimportant, but because they are so important that to discuss them seriously might open them to question and reinterpretation.

L.E. Modesitt Jr, *The Ethos Effect*

In some ways it is easy to talk about ethics, because everybody agrees that we should be ethical. We could even go a step further, and say that we agree on certain ethical values. We should be honest, for example, and we shouldn't hurt others.

We can go another step, and say we should keep to these values, even in circumstances where it might be hard to do so. The consequences for ourselves might look undesirable – we might lose our job, or a promotion, or miss out on some money. Or the pressure to do what we think is unethical may be strong – friends and colleagues expect us to do the act, they might demand it of us. But we think of an ethical person as one who is able to resist such pressures. That seems to be an essential element of ethics in practice.

Then people come up with words and arguments to explain why certain actions, which it might be suggested are unethical, are acceptable. For example, the action might seem dishonest, but the argument goes that this is how business is done. If we didn't perform these actions, our business would fall apart, competitors would ruin us and we would go broke. And everyone knows this is how things are; they expect it, they accommodate it, they adjust.

So very quickly, the simple question of ethics gets complicated. What do we talk about now? We can still talk about ethics, but is it just empty words, hypocrisy? And when we hear people talk about ethics, and high human values like honesty and service to the community, are

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they so clean? We know that some people build their fortunes on blood and dishonesty, and once they are rich, they want to preach love and kindness to everyone.

If this is how things are, perhaps it is simply foolish to be too concerned about the ethics of our own actions. Others are doing what they can to serve their own interests, even lying to us about their commitment to honesty and fairness while they are busy achieving their business ends by lying and cheating. Wouldn't we be fools to stick to the rules?

We can persuade ourselves that there is weight in all these arguments. But if this is how we decide to act, we have to ask one final question: what does this make of us? That is to say, what do we become when we give up on ethical values? Do we like ourselves? Because we haven't really given up on the values, or rather, they haven't given up on us. We still know when we are hurting someone. It's just that we have placed a big justification between us and our acknowledgment that we are doing an unethical thing.

Our conversations about ethics become clearer if we distinguish between three different orientations towards ethics:

- 1. My personal ethical standards:** Can I live with myself? Am I living in accordance with the highest values I know?
- 2. My relationships with people:** my group, organisation, family, the stranger: Do my actions contribute to positive relationships with other people?
- 3. The laws of the society I live in:** What behaviour is required or prohibited by the law?

Many conversations about ethics become confused because people don't distinguish between these different orientations, or see that they can result in different behaviour in given circumstances. We will not be able to explain behaviour, or establish guidance for our own behaviour, unless we distinguish between these different orientations. They give us different reference points for our own actions, and what we might have to say about other people's actions.

Motivations for ethics

At the root of behaviour lie beliefs about the nature of ourselves and the world, and consequently, attitudes towards how we will live in the world. These beliefs and attitudes become embodied in our values, which by nature are quite stable over time – not set in stone, but it takes a significant event or shift in perspective to change them.

We also need to consider the influence of vision. Our values are not just a reflection of how we see the existing world, they are also a reflection of how we would like the world to be. What is the ideal society? In the *I Ching*, in hexagram 48: The Well, the ideal society is described as a society of great harmony in which the leader and the people work in full cooperation and with unity of purpose. People of ability are chosen for positions of responsibility, there is mutual respect among people, there is justice, and there is an understanding of what nature provides and the need to live in harmony with its cycles.

This vision can be expanded at length, and cover any aspect of life we choose to consider. To the vision of an ideal society we can add a vision of the ideal way of life for an individual person. And we can individualise the vision to our own interests and perspectives. The point is that we all have a vision of how we would like life to be, even if we have not articulated it. It is implicit in our thoughts, words and actions.

When we take this whole bundle – our perceptions of the world, our beliefs, our attitudes, our values and our vision, and add to that our needs – we end up with motivations that affect how we act in relation to ethics. And likewise, so do other people. And of course, individuals, and groups, organisations and societies, are different in all these respects. We act according to how we see the world, and so do other people.

Is ethics relative?

This perspective raises questions about whether it is possible to have any meaningful conversation about ethics. I think this; you think that. It's all relative. Who has the right to say what is right?

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Breaking the conversation down into the three different orientations as we have done above gives us a way of having a conversation. If we only have the first orientation – my personal ethical standards – then if we disagree there is no way to resolve things. But if we realise that groups (and societies) come to certain agreements about ethics, then we can have a conversation about what we think are appropriate standards for our group.

Once we have embarked on that conversation, we see that groups and societies also establish sets of rules, policies or laws, that formalise agreements about ethics. An example at society level is consumer protection laws, which seek to protect individual consumers against unscrupulous tactics that businesses might use to cheat them out of money.

It is a dynamic situation; laws are likewise seldom set in stone. The conversation always continues, as situations change, new experiences occur, new conditions arise and perceptions evolve. Rules, laws and policies are refined, modified, reversed, replaced, augmented. We don't say that this means that ethics is relative. We say, rather, that the group, organisation or society is engaging in a continuing effort to formulate rules that align with and promote its vision of the ideal.

There is an overarching perspective to these conversations, that is to do with whether we are pessimistic or optimistic. Our perspective could be determined by the belief that people are essentially selfish and the world is an ugly jungle, and people in power make the laws only to serve themselves. My task in this book is to offer a framework that suggests that our optimism is justified.

We can, in fact, say even at this point that seeking to live ethically is worthwhile. Why? Because even if it were true that the world was a vile place, you still have to live with yourself. And you might experience life better if you live ethically, because it grants you some dignity, even if that turns out to be only in your own eyes. However, what we will say offers a much more inspiring vision. Nevertheless, it is good to know that in the darkest of scenarios, you could maintain your integrity even there.

The starting point: responsibility

There is a starting point for ethics, and it is that you accept the notion of responsibility for yourself. What does “being responsible” mean? Politicians often make a show of “accepting responsibility” but it doesn’t seem to have any consequences. They carry on as usual.

Responsibility means that you accept responsibility for your thoughts, words, and actions, and you are accountable for your thoughts and words and actions. You do not say, when you come to consider some wrongdoing, failing or shortcoming, that you couldn’t help it, or everyone does it, or you had no choice, or it wasn’t really that bad. You do not seek to evade your accountability for your actions with excuses and denials.

Being responsible has a backward-looking aspect and a forward-looking aspect. Looking back, it means having remorse for wrongdoing we have done or harm we have caused. It also means accepting punishment and making whatever recompense we can for the harm caused. Looking forward, it means we undertake not to act in the same way again.

You might recognise the influences and pressures on you, from your peer group, organisational norms, or from your upbringing or your natural inclinations. You may recognise the fears that drive you or the great desires you may have. But to talk about ethics you have to acknowledge that you bear responsibility for your thoughts, words and actions, and that you exercise choice.

This point is fundamental, and it is worth spending a day or a week simply observing yourself in relation to the acceptance of responsibility. If you scrutinise yourself with utmost honesty, you may be disconcerted by how hard it is to be fully accountable for your words and actions throughout the course of an ordinary day. We are all extremely well-trained at diverting responsibility to others and not acting in accordance with our words. Blaming others is an easy and constant temptation, but it puts up a block to and precludes any meaningful discussion of ethics.

END OF SAMPLE

About the author

GLENN MARTIN (1950–) was born in Sydney, Australia and grew up there. He moved to the far north coast of New South Wales in the mid-1970s, seeking out a back-to-the-earth life style. He stayed in the area for 20 years, holding a variety of jobs: school teacher, community worker, social researcher and manager of organisations in the community sector.

His first two books were local histories: *Places in the Bush: A history of the Kyogle Shire* (1988) and *The Kyogle Public School Centenary Book* (1995).

After gaining (belatedly) a Bachelor of Business with First Class Honours and the University Medal from Southern Cross University, he returned to live in Sydney. He works as a writer, editor and consultant on human resources, employment law, training and development, and business ethics.

He has been the editor and principal writer for the CCH Australia publication, *Managing Training & Development* for over ten years. He has contributed chapters on human resources, training and ethics to several CCH Australia books, including the *Australian Master Human Resources Guide*. He was the editor for *Training & Development in Australia* for five years. He currently edits the journal and other publications for Spirituality, Leadership and Management.

He wrote and published a book on ethics in 2007: *Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace* (updated in 2010). He has released two collections of poems and personal stories: *Flames in the Open* and *Love and Armour*.

Glenn's first novel was *The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived experience of the I Ching* (2010). His second novel is *Sustenance* (2011).

His websites are www.ethicsandvalues.com.au and www.glennmartin.com.au.

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