



# Do-it-yourself morality

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**From the beginning of human history, deciding right and wrong in defiance of God has always been a flawed human activity. But Hugh Mackay feels morality can be divorced from religion. Andrew Cameron takes a look at his arguments.**

**W**ithout God, there is no basis for morality". You may have used this claim to get someone to think twice about their rejection of God. If you reject God, think of what goes too: justice, kindness, rights, altruism, and all the apparatus of civilized life. Without God, you have no real basis for any of them.

But our number is up: they're on to us. In a liberal tradition that began centuries ago, a growing chorus is insisting that morality can be had, whether or not we believe in God. Indeed, for some, it is downright dangerous to try and mix them.

Hugh Mackay's *Right and Wrong*<sup>1</sup> is one such argument. Mackay is Australia's foremost social researcher. He has an unparalleled capacity to listen carefully and then adroitly sum up what he's heard. *Right and Wrong* is a good precis of the moral thinking and action of the people around us. In it, Mackay recounts and summarizes his renowned interviews with average people, providing valuable insights into how modern Australians think and act. Then he outlines what he thinks Australians should do to sharpen their ethical skills.

But when dealing with 'religion', he seems completely to lose his touch. As far as I can tell, Mackay does not particularly want to pick a fight with 'religion' in general, or Christianity in particular; there are many points where he tries to find common cause with both. However, the book's subtitle—'How to decide for yourself'—almost seems calculated to rankle with those who think that humanity's first and most monumental failure is the autonomous attempt to 'know good and evil' apart from God (Gen 3:5ff). At points, his tone changes to a stridently aggressive diatribe, such as when those two most repulsive stench in the liberal nostril—male priesthood and the prohibition of homosexuality—figure prominently in his argument (p. 44). His antipathy to the evangelical Christianity that I know is all too clear, and I suspect that this section has been formed more by talking with liberal Christians about religion than by actually listening to religious people.

But I don't want to major on this problem; it would only help us feel better about ourselves. It is far more important to see what this book offers us: a glimpse

into how modern Australians now think and act morally; a glimpse of how they think Christian morality works; and an opportunity to recast what we really believe in terms that they can access and understand. Unless we make some headway here, we will make no sense when we try to commend Christianity to them. The best way to pursue this goal is to clarify some aspects of Christian thought about morality in dialogue with Mackay. For as I travelled through Mackay's account of ethics, I was plagued by two recurring 'yes, buts'.

The first has to do with moral truth. Christianity's central fight with the Enlightenment has always been about autonomy. In 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', Immanuel Kant lauded autonomous reasoning as the mark of true human maturity.<sup>2</sup> Enlightenment is "the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point". Yet "everywhere there is restriction on freedom"—for example, the cleric who says, "Do not argue but believe!" Mackay sits in continuity with this secularist and liberal lineage. His book opens with a cel-

celebration of Western freedoms, whereas “divinely ordained” religious moral prescriptions are “an abdication of personal responsibility and moral sensitivity” (p. 44): “For fully-fledged moral creatures, being ‘good’ is never about obedience” (p. 46).

This rather trenchant position seems like an attack on religion. But Mackay thinks he sets it free by erecting a Chinese wall between religion and morality. The first is concerned with ‘Why are we here?’ whereas the second is concerned with ‘How should we live together?’, and it is “dangerous” to mix them (p. 43). He justifies this splitting of the ‘how’ from the ‘why’ on the basis that religion deals with “the interior, spiritual realm, whereas morality is an exterior, social construct” (p. 43). Apparently religion’s “comforts and consolations will always be precious to believers” (p. 8), hence religion should “operate in the realm of spirituality and

In splitting religion from morality, it becomes important for Mackay to say two things about religion. On the one hand, the different religions often say similar things about morality, which helps to confirm our moral hunches; references to Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist texts help Mackay’s case at various points. But on the other hand, religions differ: some teach humility and counsel against revenge, whereas others do the opposite (p. 45). The cumulative effect of Mackay’s approach sustains his case that religions have no monopoly on morality. Each gives some sensible moral truths, each gives some morally objectionable lies (although, oddly, only Christianity comes under fire), but on the whole, moral truth is available to everyone whether they are religious or not. This is the sense, then, in which morality doesn’t need God. Moral truth is just out there among us, available to all.

surprise us when people discover moral truths apart from any knowledge of Jesus or the Bible. These discoveries are fragmentary and incomplete, but the impulse to love a child, to stay faithful to a spouse, to help the poor and weak, to care for animals, to rule a tribe justly—all of these reflect the image of the one who made us, an image which sin can never erase. Christians can affirm these glimpses of goodness with gratitude. So in a strictly limited sense, it is correct to believe that morality is possible “without God”. Just as an atheist can enjoy life and breath while ignoring her maker, so also can she participate in the moral order that surrounds her and which has been planted within her.

Mackay’s approach to deciding right and wrong for ourselves is, roughly, that we should aim for happiness—sometimes our own, sometimes that of others. Other people should be taken seriously, and since humans are social animals, our dwindling communities deserve actions that support and grow them. We would also do well to seek to become “virtuous” people as we go about our decision-making. Hence each decision can be approached with an attitude of “mindfulness”, interrogated from a variety of perspectives. His approach acknowledges that there is no one simple “system” of ethics to solve all decisions. But he skirts around any attempt to specify what “goodness” actually is, assuming that we can spot it when we see it.

There is a mistake here. It has to do with what we all half-see about ourselves. The mistake becomes apparent in his poignant portrayal of the humanity he asks all this of: “When it comes to morality, we often say one thing and do another” (p. 13). He quotes what appears to be an interview subject: “If you ask me how I think I should live—what values I should live by—I can tell you. But don’t look at my life for the evidence” (p. 21). Six similar stories follow. Mackay explains away this “values gap” by surmising that people are still in the process of adjusting their values to new ways of life. But elsewhere humans are selfish, flawed and self-deceiving (pp. 62, 127, 168ff):

Who am I, this person who won’t face the truth about myself; this person who

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mysticism where it has always done its finest work”. For Mackay, morality is no longer “the special province of paternalistic religious leaders”; instead, “the power to make enlightened moral choices now passes to each individual, each family and each community” (p. 9).

“Yes”, I kept thinking, “but when has Christianity ever disagreed with this claim?” Of course, if I’m honest, I will concede that sometimes Christian thought has disagreed. A longstanding position in theology holds that goodness resides solely in God and in what he commands. Only God’s will defines the good, and had God commanded the torture of babies, it would be right to torture babies. Thankfully, he hasn’t so commanded.

But what made me say “thankfully” just then? Perhaps I said it because I remain, at heart, a would-be rebel who, until my dying day, will never find it easy to trust God. But even so, there is a further explanation: I feel horror at baby-torture because God has woven into me a ‘moral order’ of his own making. The elements of what is right and wrong are somehow stitched into who we are, and into the material order we inhabit. After all, we are made in the image of the one who dwells in eternal relationships of mutual love, so it does not surprise us if humanity also exhibits deep and powerful impulses to love.

If that’s the way things are, it won’t





prefers to live a lie, even in front of my own bathroom mirror, rather than accept who I really am, with all my frailties, shortcomings and flaws? Who am I, this person wallowing in self-satisfaction and self-centredness ... this person who lacks the humility required to laugh at myself ... and the ability to see myself for who I really am—human, mortal, a mere speck in space? (p. 170)

Mackay retells the story of a young boy who, desperate for peer group acceptance, convinces himself that “shoplifting is not the same as stealing—no-one really suffers—it’s just harmless fun” (p. 66). He also writes about two adults who could not (or would not) make the most basic moral distinctions, so enmeshed were they in their tribe of HIH directors (pp. 179ff). This boy and these men are strikingly similar to Augustine. The boy Augustine stole pears in order to be accepted by his peer group. The man Augustine wrote lying speeches in praise of Rome’s emperor in order to get ahead.

These experiences deeply troubled him: why steal pears he didn’t like or need? Why write words he didn’t believe about a man he didn’t like? He concludes what Mackay does not: *our desires are hopelessly scrambled*—to the point where we convince ourselves away from any number of right things to get what we want—which is usually some good thing blown all out of proportion.

Mackay’s approach does not include a serious analysis of the nature of our desires, and as a result—particularly in the chapters on sex, relationships and business ethics—his advice about when to give ourselves what we want is sometimes quite obscure. His method for moral decision-making puts the central problem at arm’s length: what do I do with my desires? The problem is that we all know what ethics is in general—until we are making decisions about ourselves. Says John Calvin, “In reply to the general question, every man will affirm that murder is evil. But he who is plotting the

death of an enemy contemplates murder as something good ... Herein is man’s ignorance: when he comes to a particular case, he forgets the general principle that he has just laid down.”<sup>3</sup> Mackay paints us in all our drives, our fragmented busyness, and our concern to please others, yet fails to conclude with the millennia of Christian thought that we’re just not up to the task of choosing morality for ourselves.

Hence my second ‘yes, but’. Yes, all people can know some moral truths, but why does it remain so hard to act on them? Might it not be the case that we need some really serious help? Christianity tells the story of God rescuing us from a darkness that is largely the result of our extraordinarily confused desires. The desires themselves are an inbuilt created good, and what we desire is usually good, but in our current human package, we can’t match the two. We obsess over some good things and ignore other good things, and the net effect is that we are basically incapable of the sort of “mindfulness” that Mackay espouses as the key to a good life. As Calvin writes, “Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deceptions, is subject to so many errors, dashes against so many obstacles, is caught in so many difficulties, that it is far from directing us aright”.<sup>4</sup>

**Our desires are hopelessly scrambled—to the point where we convince ourselves away from any number of right things to get what we want.**

This is the true sense in which there is no basis for morality without God. The God who rescues us from judgement also begins to repair the topography of our desires. (Incidentally, this answers two of Mackay’s more serious misunderstandings of Christian morality: it is not a system of rewards and punishments, nor is salvation a means of justifying ongoing moral laxity.) A part of that process is God speaking commands to us which sometimes cut across what we want. Moral



truth is written on every human heart, says Augustine:

But because people, desiring those things which are outside themselves, have even become exiles from themselves, there has been given a written law: not because in hearts it had not been written, but because you were a deserter from your heart. You are seized by Him that is everywhere, and to yourself within are called back. Therefore what does the written law cry to those that have deserted the law written in their hearts? “Take it to heart, you rebels!” (Isa 46:8).<sup>5</sup>

seeker knocks on our door. Then we suddenly decide that, somehow, ethics has changed.

I wish space permitted me to explore the specific issues Mackay engages with. Why *has* Christian morality promoted truth-telling, or male ‘headship’, or life-long marital fidelity between a man and a woman as the best and only home for sex? Can the biblical data on these matters be ‘synthesized’ into an account of what’s best for us? I believe it can, with that ‘best’ including a rethink of what our desires are for, what they are telling us at their best, and how to approach the

in wisdom; Christian morality never suggests that it is always only ever about “mere obedience”. God wants me to grow into the image of his son.

Now there’s someone who loved everything good as the right thing for himself—without making any of it up on his own. **B**

#### ENDNOTES

1. Hodder Headline, Sydney, 2004.
2. ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, December 1784, pp. 481-494.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960, II.ii.23.
4. *ibid*, II.ii.25.
5. Augustine, commentary on Palm 58:1 (language slightly updated).

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Augustine goes on to state the obvious: no-one needs to be told they don’t like to be stolen from, or to have their wife or husband stolen, or to be otherwise made to suffer, and the ‘golden rule’ is indeed obvious to everyone—except when we are full and someone else is hungry, or when we are safe and an asylum

structures of our world. But those explanations remain for another day.

Meanwhile, Mackay’s book leaves me assured that “being good” *does* include a place for obedience—precisely because I am so poor at being “mindful” and at “choosing” morality for myself. This doesn’t mean that, over time, I won’t grow